

NUR JAHAN



SHE ALLOWED THE PIGEON TO ESCAPE

N U R J A H A N

THE ROMANCE OF AN INDIAN QUEEN

BY

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**DEDICATED
TO
SIRDAR UMRAO SINGH**

NUR JAHAN

CHAPTER I

THE road from Kandahar to India, if the precipitous track may in any way be so called, runs through bald, bleak, dreary, and cheerless mountains. Here and there it passes through beautiful valleys, bright with pomegranate orchards and clustering vines, bordered by walnut trees and tall, slender pines, but for the most part it is more like a series of ruined staircases, with many steps missing, than a road, struggling through rugged mountains, under beetling cliffs, skirting yawning chasms, sleeping in the silence of desolation; the appalling monotony of it; the bare, burnt up rocky heights being occasionally relieved by a struggling juniper or a rhododendron growing in solitary grandeur.

Among these frowning rocks and fearful precipices, in the early spring of the first half of the seventeenth century, a man and a woman with a cow were wearily threading their lonely way. The track had brought them down some three thousand feet, and then ended in a defile, inter-

sected by wild ravines running back long distances into the heart of the mountains. The man looked at the calm, blue sky and then at the desolate path which lay before them with a mingled look of helplessness and despair, and then turning round he urged forward the cow on which his wife was seated.

He was neither tall nor handsome in appearance, and yet there was something noble and prepossessing about him ; the deep lines of adversity which furrowed the broad expanse of his forehead heightened the dignified and resolute expression of his determined face, and fittingly framed the fathomless profundity of his coal black eyes. His complexion, though sunburnt, was not swarthy, while his long, flowing locks, streaked with silver grey, falling on his broad shoulders, gave him a lofty air, in spite of his shabby dress.

The woman with him was his wife. She was tall, like an exceedingly well grown cypress, the beauty of her figure displaying perfect symmetry, being heightened by a face, usually glowing richly like a rose, but now pale and damp from weariness and suffering ; but in spite of this her large, liquid eyes were lit up with all the softness of love and obedience, characteristic of a Mahomedan wife, as she turned to her husband for help, past huge boulders which lay everywhere along his path.

‘ My lord,’ she said at last in a low, tremulous voice, trying to conceal her suffering, ‘ I can go no

further even with your help. I can cling on no longer.'

'Dearest, struggle on for yet a little while. There in the valley below, among the myrtle groves and drooping vines, where you see the river winding, is sure to be a village where we can claim hospitality,' said her husband. 'God will not forsake us.'

'I cannot,' moaned his wife; 'even my love for you which has enabled me to bear everything up to now, rather than cause you the slightest anxiety, cannot overcome my pain. But do me a favour. Leave me here and go to the valley below to get help. If you can return to-night do so, if not, to-morrow you can come to me. If I am alive well and good, otherwise, my lord, both now and evermore, farewell.'

For hours she had struggled with increasing pain, unwilling to make her distressed husband a sharer of her suffering. The effort to speak calmly, and the thought of for ever losing him, sapped all her remaining strength, and she fell forward in a swoon, in the arms mechanically held out to receive her.

'Leave her,' murmured Ghias Beg, for that was his name, as he bore her in his arms to the shade of a friendly tree where he gently laid her on the soft grass and dry leaves. 'Leave her indeed. What have I to live for in this world? Certainly not for myself, when the only loving soul who has

brightened my days of darkness and affliction is no more.'

He ran to a small trickling stream, which happened to be near, and brought some water in the hollow of his hand. He sprinkled it carefully on the sufferer's face, moistened her parched lips, then deftly rubbed her feet, entreating her to awake by all the loving words he had used since she had been his wife, imploring her not to desert him at this trying moment.

For a long time there was no response to his calls of love. He kissed and caressed her and begged her to speak to him once again; he fanned her forehead and tended her with such solicitude, that even 'hearts of stone' would have melted in sympathy for him.

For a long time there was no sign of returning consciousness, but at last his wife half opened her eyes, and his face brightened with hope as he anxiously inquired:

'Life of my life, consoler of my soul, how are you?'

'I am better,' she said, as she forgot for the moment the pain that was racking her, and sweetly looking up, she attempted to smile. But the pain returned, and for about an hour and a half it was so intense that she moaned and cried in spite of herself, and as it grew in intensity it scarce allowed her even a moment's rest.

Poor Ghias Beg hovered round her, rubbing her

feet, supporting her in his arms, and pressing loving kisses on her forehead, as if he believed that love would conquer her pain. As a last resource he turned towards Kaba, and throwing himself on his knees, bowed in prayer, asking only for this one boon, that his beloved might be relieved of her agony and be spared to him.

The intensity of his emotions, added to the weariness of his body and his weakness from hunger, must have caused him to swoon, and when he regained consciousness and rose to his feet he found his wife free from pain and sweetly smiling on him, whilst in her arms she held her new-born daughter.

Amidst these wild surroundings was born at dusk the girl, Nur Jahan, who was fated to live in the minds of so many generations. Ghias Beg was overcome with joy and danced about like a madman. He ran to the brook for water for his wife, but a shadow came across his face as he looked up and saw the setting sun shivering in a golden haze, which cast such a strange, lurid light in those deserted mountains. He turned impulsively to his wife, his whole heart concentrated in one last effort to save her.

Lifting her up, he mounted her on the cow, supporting her with one hand and stretching out the other for the babe. But as he did so, he awakened to the helpless condition of his wife, who dropped down from her seat, unable to

support herself. He paused, beads of perspiration covering his brow. A strong conflict between duty and necessity was taking place in his soul, in which the latter at last prevailed, and he resolved to save himself and his wife and leave the child to the chances of the road. With tensely strained feelings he took the child in his arms, and stripping himself of his only coat, wrapped her in it, and placed the bundle under a bush on the roadside. The child smiled as he left her there. He turned hurriedly away, took his wife in his arms, and placed her on the cow, which he then drove onwards.

‘My child,’ cried the mother feebly, as she looked from her husband to the waif lying on the roadside.

Ghias Beg closed his eyes, ran his hand over his face feeling all the while that he was behaving unlike himself, but as she continued to look back, he aroused himself to invent some excuse.

‘You are not well, dearest, let us push on.’

‘Ah,’ she said caressingly, laying her pale hand on his shoulder, ‘you are so tired.’ But after a few minutes’ forgetfulness she suddenly drew back her hand with a start, and a gaze of alarmed inquiry :

‘But where is the child ? where have you left her ?’

‘The child is safe,’ he muttered, ‘do not worry yourself.’

‘My child, my child,’ she screamed, looking terrified, and clinging to him, ‘where have you left the child?’

‘Dearest,’ he said, with a scarcely perceptible movement across his face, as if to keep off some darting pain, ‘you would not have your husband perish in these wild mountains?’

‘Bring me back my child,’ she cried plaintively, and then endeavoured to turn back the cow towards the babe, but she was so weak that she fell again into a swoon.

Ghias Beg tenderly laid her on the grass, and felt abashed when she came to her senses. He did not dare to kiss her as he longed to do, and said in an apologetic tone, ‘Now do not fret, dearest. It was for your sake that I forsook the child. I will bring her to you, even if we perish we will perish all together. Allah is great.’

‘Forgive me, dear lord,’ she said softly, ‘I knew you could not be so hard-hearted. You will pardon my speaking to you so roughly?’

Without making any reply Ghias Beg retraced his steps. He felt very tired, but as he approached the child and saw her encircled by a black cobra, which covered her face with its hood, his strength returned and he darted forward to kill it, when to his great surprise the serpent disappeared, before his very eyes, he knew not where.

He took the child in his arms, hugged her to his breast in a transport of passion as he carried her

to his wife, who clasped it to her bosom, and faintly smiled her gratitude.

Ghias Beg fell on his knees and prayed to God to forgive him for having deserted the new-born babe. When he arose from his prayers he felt a strange peace stealing over him as he saw his wife nursing it, happy in her fond, maternal duty, in spite of the twilight shadow, which seemed to swallow the blood red rays of the departing sun, and he feebly said, 'Ah, if we only had some conveyance to take us to the nearest caravanserai.'

'You shall have it,' said a voice from behind; 'the God who created your infant has provided means for its safety.'

Ghias Beg turned round and saw a tall, good looking man of distinguished appearance, riding a camel which glittered with trappings. Full as he was with the idea of divine intervention, Ghias Beg for a while took the stranger, with his long, flowing beard and green robe for 'Khizer' (a divine angel who helps people in distress), come by divine command to his aid.

'Who ever you may be, kind sir,' said Ghias Beg, 'you have filled me with hope, and will perhaps save me from a crowning degradation and deliver us all from death.'

'My name is Malak Masud. I am the chief of a caravan travelling this way. I rode ahead and was resting under a tree on the path above the one you travelled by,' said the stranger dismounting

from his camel and approaching Ghias Beg. 'Hearing your wife's cries, I became a reluctant witness of her anguish and your helplessness. I ought to have come to you immediately, but I was afraid to intrude, and when the child was born I at once noted the time of its birth. I am a dabbler in astrology. Your babe excited my curiosity, and I began to work out its horoscope. I grew so absorbed in my calculations that I forgot all about you and did not notice that you had left the place. Perhaps I should have been still there,' he added with a smile, 'if my followers had not come up and disturbed me. Now, my friend, do not worry yourself about anything. I will see to your comfort. It is growing dark and we must hurry on. I will change the saddle of my camel and give you and your wife a pannier. You will, however, have to be careful of the overhanging cliffs of these bridle paths, as a blow against one side or the other may unseat you both.'

Down upon his knees sank Ghias Beg and thanked God for His mercy, and then expressed his gratitude to his human benefactor. The camels came up, and the panniers being adjusted, Ghias Beg lifted up his wife and child into one side, balancing their weight by getting into the other himself, and again expressed his thanks for the timely help given by Malak Masud.

'You make me ashamed by your profuse thanks,' said Malak. 'I am doing towards you

that which I know you would do if I myself were in distress. You are, perhaps, a countryman and an Afghan ? ’

‘ No, kind sir,’ said Ghias Beg, ‘ I am a Persian.’

‘ You have a noble bearing,’ observed Malak Masud. ‘ May I ask what led you to travel alone over these wild mountains ? Let me assure you that my object is very far from being connected with any impertinent curiosity.’

‘ I am a gentleman by birth,’ said Ghias Beg, looking towards the ground, ‘ and you will indeed pity me even more when you know all the distressing details of my life. My father, the celebrated Kwaja Mohamed Sherif, was the Prime Minister of Shah Mohamed Khan Taklu, and when Shah Mohamed Khan died, he continued to serve King Tehmasaph in the same capacity. On my father’s death I was appointed Foreign Minister, but my father had left innumerable enemies. My position was no bed of roses. The king was weak and in the hands of people who filled his ears with false reports. I could have managed to keep down their intrigues, if the king had been strong, but as he did not care to take any action, I was greatly harassed by the enemies of my father, who, finding all other means of bringing me to disgrace fail, thought of taking my life. The plot was discovered, but the king refused to do anything. I was disgusted with my work, my position, and my imbecile master, and resolved to leave Persia.

One dark night, with a few followers and servants, I left Teheran. Misfortunes dogged my steps. I had hardly crossed the Persian borders when a gang of Afghan freebooters fell on us and carried off all that we had, my slaves, my wealth, my belongings. My wife and I were left without anything except a cow, which you see is still with us.'

'What place do you intend to illumine by your presence?' asked the Malak. 'Is there any one in these parts who has the pleasure of your friendship?'

'Alas, I have no one now whom I could call a friend,' said Ghias Beg. 'I am going to India on what may turn out to be a fool's errand. Kings are as changeable as the bubbles on the crest of a wave. How can a poor man like me now dare approach the throne of mighty Akbar, and yet I intended to pay my homage to His Majesty, as I have a sort of claim on him. When Emperor Humaon, defeated and harassed by Sher Shah, sought refuge in Teheran, my father was appointed to look after the princely refugee and royal guest. Humaon was so pleased with my father that he gave him a letter expressing his appreciation of his services and promising to reward him should an opportunity occur. I am going to Akbar in the hope that His Majesty may in consideration of the services rendered by my father, give me some employment, and thus earn my everlasting gratitude.'

‘His Majesty is sure to do something for you, more perhaps than you have any idea,’ said Malak. ‘I have access to His Majesty, who is the Light of the Universe, and will myself present you to him.’

Ghias Beg made a profound salaam, tears dropped from his eyes, his heart was too full of emotion to permit any expression of feeling from his lips. After a long pause he said, ‘You have this day done a deed which will not be forgotten by Him who is the Dispenser of all bounties. Can it ever be forgotten by me?’

‘Pardon me,’ said Malak Masud, as he drew out a case of books from his camel’s pannier, and lighted a lamp which even the strong wind that was blowing could not extinguish; ‘I have not yet finished the horoscope of your child. I was deep in my calculations when my servants unfortunately disturbed me. I would like to finish it, as I am rather curious to know the future of your child, whose arrival in this world has been so strange.’

So saying he drew out a paper from his poshteen (fur coat) and consulted a few well-worn books. Tracing some strange geometrical figures, he filled in the spaces with mystic hieroglyphs, and completing his calculations, he suddenly exclaimed in a voice full of astonishment, ‘God be praised! She will live to be an Empress and rule great nations, control and direct great wars and warriors. You doubt me?’ he added, turning

to Ghias Beg, as he noticed an incredulous look on his face. 'I know the exact moment of her birth, and my prediction is liable to no uncertainty.'

'You are too good and kind, dear sir,' said Ghias Beg, 'and it is your kind heart which speaks to give me hope, yet I beg leave to question the infallibility of your prediction. I have in my life never found any good in these studies. My father believed a great deal in astrology, and often spoke to me of the powerful star which ruled my destiny, and here am I a penniless and lonely wanderer as you see.'

'And yet,' said Malak Masud, without heeding what Ghias Beg said, 'Saturn has the power to thwart the star Venus, which is disposed to favour her, and evil will result from the love which she inspires, but Venus is so favourably disposed that the influence of Saturn cannot be appreciable. At most there will be a crisis in her life, and beyond that peace and honour and good fortune await her. Better to have the menace of ill fortune in early life than in its decline. Name her Mihar-ul-Nissa, the 'Sun of Woman.'

Further conversation was prevented, as they now reached the caravanserai where lodgings such as they had not known for months were provided for them. Ghias Beg and his wife found themselves again surrounded by all the comforts which money and care could procure.

CHAPTER II

MALAK MASUD stopped for a fortnight in the caravanserai to allow Ghias Beg's wife to recover her strength. It was only when she was strong enough that the journey was resumed. Starting out each day before sunrise, when myriads of birds raised their voices in song to greet the day, they reached the next stage before the sun became very hot, marching again in the evening when the lovely moon added a new charm to the warm Indian skies, as it shed its peaceful, mellow light on the green fields and shady trees rustling in the cool, fresh breeze. Late in the night they would stop at some inn, where poor travellers were entertained at the public expense.

Thus marching by slow degrees, Ghias Beg and Malak Masud one fine morning reached Lahore, where the mighty Akbar was then in camp.

As they passed through the streets Ghias Beg was struck and exhilarated by the cheerfulness, bustle, and gaiety which prevailed in the city.

Parties of young men clad in snow white garments walked about sprinkling coloured and

perfumed waters and throwing scarlet powder impregnated with attar-de-rose at each other.

Sweet strains of music and melodious song came from the houses lining the streets, filling the air with their sweetness, soldiers and servants of the imperial household, dignified and proud as cock-pheasants, in their bright golden liveries, marched through the streets, stopping here and there to crack jokes with some fair betel seller or dancing girl, displaying her charms with all the allurements of her class.

Now and then passed equipages of the nobles, each vying with the other in splendour, making the whole scene one of grandeur and gaiety.

‘Magnificent!’ said Ghias Beg. ‘It is a wonderful city, and seems to be overflowing with merriment and fun.’

‘They are celebrating Holi (Spring Festival) as well as New Year’s Day,’ said Malak Masud; ‘we are just in time. His Majesty holds a durbar to-morrow, when I hope to present you. Every one loves his Majesty so well, that they all rejoice with him in celebrating New Year’s Day.’

‘Every one seems to be dancing with joy,’ remarked Ghias Beg. ‘As for my presentation,’ he added, ‘gratitude so fills my heart, that I can find no words to thank you. If every hair of my body were to turn into a tongue, even then I would not be able to thank you sufficiently.’

Your city, sir, seems to have an air of comfort in spite of all this grandeur.'

'This will presently be your home, and then you will like it still more,' replied Malak Masud.

Meanwhile the news of Malak's arrival had reached his home, and a host of friends and servants came to welcome him to it. The Malak dismounted from his camel and embraced his friends one by one. He then spoke kindly to his servants, who made their salaams and respectfully retired.

Malak Masud conducted Ghias Beg to his own sitting-room, where they all took their seats on piles of cushions.

Betel and cardamons were at once served, and rings of fragrant smoke from beautifully chased silver pipes curled up and vanished in the lofty room. After a little chat with his friends Malak Masud arose, and conducted Ghias Beg to the rooms which his agent had already prepared for him.

'Farewell for the present,' said the Malak, who was anxious to rejoin his friends, 'we will go to His Majesty to-morrow at a propitious moment. In the meantime consider this your home and make yourself comfortable.'

When the Malak retired, a servant came and respectfully bowing placed the keys of the boxes which were in the room before Ghias Beg.

‘ These keys are not mine,’ said Ghias Beg, ‘ take them to your master.’

‘ My good master,’ replied the servant, making a profound bow, ‘ told me they were yours.’ He then respectfully withdrew.

Ghias Beg cast a questioning look at his wife.

‘ They are yours,’ she said ; ‘ the good Malak has presented all this to you.’

‘ How can I ever repay our friend for all the kindness and generosity which he has shown us ? ’ said Ghias Beg.

‘ God is great,’ replied his Begum, ‘ and we may some day be of some use to him.’

Ghias Beg opened the boxes and found in them several court and other dresses for himself and his Begum ; even the smaller articles of toilet had not been forgotten.

He and his wife went on their knees to thank God for His mercy to them, and after dinner, which was served in their own room, passed the night in blissful sleep.

Next morning Ghias Beg, with his friend Malak Masud, drove through the city in a splendid chariot, to which were attached two gorgeously caparisoned horses. Both of them were richly apparelled, and Ghias Beg already looked a great dignitary.

From the city to the castle and the camp, they passed through an unbroken line of splendour. The bazaars and baths were all covered with the

richest stuffs : groups of gay young citizens strewed delicious flowers, till every part of the city was as fragrant as if a caravan of musk from Khotan had passed through it.

The gallant appearance of Rajas and Mogul nobles, distinguished by insignia of the Emperor's favour, preceded by silver rimmed kettledrums, and splendidly dressed attendants, who carried silver battle-axes and massive gold maces in their hands ; the glittering of gold pineapples on silver palanquins ; the embroidered trappings of the elephants, bearing on their backs small turrets in the shape of antique golden temples, within which sat proud Rajput princes ; all this made the scene surpassingly magnificent. But the sight which met their eyes when they had crossed the city was beyond description.

The fort seemed to have been wrapped in cloth of gold, which blazed out dazzlingly in the intense sunlight, while from within the enclosure sparkled domes of magnificent pavilions like brilliant stars, or flashed like lightning as the sun's rays fell upon them.

The sounding of drums announced that some important ceremony was taking place. Hundreds of golden barges floated upon the placid waters of the Ravi, their banners mingling their variegated colours above, whilst all the hues of the rainbow seemed to be reflected in the clear waters beneath.

Dismounting from the chariot at some distance

from the gate of the enclosure of the Durbar-i-am, they walked slowly through the beautifully laid out avenues and paths, which all converged towards the magnificent pavilions, where Akbar was to hold his Durbar. On reaching it they passed through many antechambers, all sumptuously furnished, until they stood in the great hall, which led to the imperial reception room, which was filled to overflowing with a multitude of nobles and courtiers. Here they were shortly joined by Faizi, the Master of Ceremonies, who embraced Malak Masud and entered into conversation with him.

‘What joy!’ exclaimed Faizi. ‘Fortune sends you to me when I least expected to heighten the pleasures of this New Year’s Day. His Majesty has often made inquiries about you.’

‘You are very kind,’ replied Malak Masud. ‘The wanderer has found his way home at last; but my warm hearted friend who now seems so happy at meeting me, never sent a word to lure me to him.’

‘God is my witness,’ said Faizi warmly, ‘you have taken your abode in my heart, and whenever I wished, I held commune with you. How could I ever put in writing those outpourings, which my heart whispered in my friend’s ear.’

‘My sweet tongued siren,’ said Malak Masud, ‘you could woo even the angels from above. Though I talked almost every day with you, and through you with God, still I am enchanted to hear these sweet words from your lips once more.’

In the meantime, at the propitious moment fixed by the astrologers, Akbar took his bath and dressed himself according to the colour of the ruling star for the day, amid song and dance, music and ceremony, now according to Hindu custom, now according to Moslem taste, and then when the exact moment arrived, the roar of trumpets and drums, and the thundering of guns, announced that His Majesty had ascended the throne.

The large folding doors were thrown open and the whole multitude passed into the Durbar Hall : they made their kurnishes (bows) and took up positions according to their rank. At the head of the Hall sat Akbar upon a superb throne made of silver and gold, to which the ocean had presented its gems and the mountain its jewels ; four silver lions standing at the foot of the throne supported the canopy of gold set with diamonds, from which fell strings of pearls and dazzling globes of gold and silver.

The monarch was dressed in a rich and elegant costume, his long, saffron silk toga falling in many folds about his well knit form, and was kept in place by a belt sparkling with rubies of the rarest value, his turban was adorned with a tiara, whose points were surmounted with diamonds of the purest water, and pearls of extraordinary size and splendour.

But most remarkable of all was Akbar himself.

Though of little more than middle stature, he seemed to tower immeasurably above the rest. His chest was so developed in breadth that it seemed capable of staying the march of an army; through the close fitting sleeves of his long, flowing coat, the muscles of his long, sinewy arms showed rigid and gnarled like knots of oak. His countenance was still more remarkable than his form, his face being like that of a lion, exceedingly firm in expression, yet his sweetly smiling lips gave it a gentleness, winning as that of a father.

His broad, open forehead shone out with an almost divine dignity, while from beneath his bushy, meeting eyebrows, his large penetrating eyes were lit with catholic love, which they appeared to pour out on all from their fathomless depths.

On the left side of His Majesty sat the little Prince Salim, who was in his third year, exceedingly handsome, with coal black hair and dark eyes delicately formed. In his ears he wore small golden rings in token of his bondage to the great saint Salim Chisti, to whose prayers his fond parents believed they owed his birth.

On the right side of the throne stood Abul Fazal, the great philosopher and statesman, in his long, flowing robes of state, and near him stood his brother Faizi, the poet-laureate, who performed the duties of Master of Ceremonies.

On the left stood rows of light-hearted courtiers

who bowed at every word, while on the right stood proud Rajput Rajas in their saffron coloured turbans, proudly twirling their moustaches with one hand, while the other rested on their swords. They looked fierce as lions ready to pounce on their prey at any moment.

Behind the throne stood bearers and Naqibs (heralds), who called out the name and title of each nobleman who stepped forward to make his kurnish.

When the grandees of the state had made their homage and laid their offerings before the throne, Malak Masud and Ghias Beg stepped forward, the Naqib called out their names in a sonorous voice, they knelt before the throne and with their right palms on their foreheads, made three salaams. Malak Masud, taking a casket full of jewels and flowers from the hand of an attendant, waved it ceremoniously before the throne, and laid it on the heap of jewels already lying at its feet.

‘ So you have returned,’ graciously said Akbar, as he bade them rise. ‘ I missed you greatly, and am glad to have you with me once again. Ah, who is this gentleman with you ? ’

‘ Most gracious sovereign,’ answered Malak Masud, ‘ may you live as long as the sun warmeth the earth, to the age of Khizer. Your humble servant has ventured to bring with him a Persian nobleman, who was anxious to kiss the dust of your gate. His name is Ghias Beg, and he is the son of

Mirza Mohamed Sherif, who was Prime Minister of Persia in the time of King Tehmasaph, and had the good fortune to attend his Majesty the Emperor Humaon, may heaven be enlightened by his abode, when His Majesty honoured the capital of Persia with a visit, and His Majesty was pleased to grant him letters, signifying his approval of his services. As a moth is attracted by the light, so has he come to your luminous altar to sacrifice himself.'

Akbar took the letter from the hand of Abul Fazal, kissed it and placed it on the throne, and then turning to Ghias Beg said affably, 'You are welcome, sir. The son of the man who tended my father in misfortune has great claims on me.'

At a sign from His Majesty, Abul Fazal notified an attendant, who came with valuable robes and presents. These Abul Fazal bestowed on Ghias Beg, and then said, 'His Majesty has signified that you are to be attached to His Majesty's personal staff, and I am happy to communicate to you the wishes of His Majesty.'

Ghias Beg again bowed, and said, 'Most gracious Sovereign, what can I say in praise of your Majesty to express my gratitude? The very air murmurs in praise of you, and the sun itself obeys your commands.' Thus saying, without turning his back, he withdrew to his own place.

When all the assembled guests had paid their homage and the ceremony of presentation was

over, Akbar rose, while all the others Durbaris prostrated themselves on the ground.

His Majesty bade them rise, and surrounded by the whole assemblage, moved to another pavilion. The high Cashmere aigrette quivered in his turban, while his robe sparkled with the light of many jewels. Reaching the pavilion he was weighed on scales, the beams of which were of pure gold, against gold, silver, and perfumes, twelve times in succession. All this gold, silver and other substances, as well as the gold and jewels laid before the throne, were flung among the assembled masses, who scrambled, each bent on securing something for himself. The Emperor then showered gold and silver nuts, which were eagerly scrambled for by the gravest of the courtiers.

When this was over, His Majesty, leaning on the arm of Abul Fazal, ascended to the stairs leading to the balcony, and there took his seat on a throne of sandal wood, under a canopy of gold, and as he now became visible to the entire multitude thronging against the barriers, a deafening cheer went up, as if to rend the very skies.

The Emperor bowed with all the graciousness of manner usual to him, and all was silent again. Then 50,000 elephants, richly adorned, passed in procession before him, the leading elephant of each company wearing large gold plates upon its head and breast : 12,000 horses, gorgeously caparisoned, followed the elephants, after which came in

succession, rhinoceri, lions, tigers, panthers, hunting leopards, hounds and hawks : the procession finishing late in the afternoon with a vast host of cavalry and infantry, resplendent in cloth of gold.

The Emperor then retired, leaving grandees and guests, who were served with delicately perfumed sherbets, fruits, and sweets of the choicest varieties, as they formed into friendly groups, talking gaily with each other.

‘Accept my hearty congratulations,’ said Malak Masud to Ghias Beg, ‘I wish you all success in your new position.’

‘My dear friend,’ said Ghias Beg, ‘I know my unworthiness. It is all due to you. It seems to me like a dream.’

‘Am I bewitched, or do I really see before me my old friend?’ here put in a fat, well-shaved person coming near Malak Masud.

‘Ah, Bir Bal,’ exclaimed Malak Masud, ‘have you dropped from the clouds? I have looked in vain for you everywhere.’

‘Your brain has perhaps been working in the seventh heaven, otherwise you would have seen me in my usual place near His Majesty. Was I not there, Faizi?’ asked Raja Bir Bal.

‘Ah, the two inseparables!’ said Malak Masud. ‘I was really blind not to have seen you in your usual place. Let me present to you both, Mirza Ghias Beg of Teheran.’

Raja Bir Bal and Faizi salaamed and expressed their pleasure at making his acquaintance.

‘What have you been doing all this time?’ inquired Bir Bal of the Malak. ‘I hope you have had enough of vagabondism, and will now settle down for some time.’

‘Impossible,’ added Faizi; ‘our Malak cannot stay long anywhere. He is like a mountain stream which must flow on and on.’

‘I, too, would like to travel,’ said Bir Bal, ‘and lead my old, untrammelled life again, but His Majesty holds me like a magnet, and I am powerless.’

‘Old life, indeed,’ murmured Faizi with a shudder. ‘When I was driven away from home, merely because my brother Abul Fazal entered into a discussion with the Shaikh-ul-Sadar, and because I said I was surprised at the strife between the faithful and the heretic, for the same light illumines the temple as shines in the mosque.’

‘You have had your revenge,’ said Bir Bal smiling; ‘the poor old Shaikh has gone on a pilgrimage to Mecca.’

‘He has,’ said Faizi; ‘but your tiny shafts of wit inflicted more pain on his poor, faithful heart than all the philosophic arguments of my learned brother.’

‘True,’ said Malak; ‘for the arrows that Bir Bal shot pierced deep. What a strange fate. It was only the other day that he touched His Majesty

himself with a stick, and now he is on his way to Mecca.'

'All the better for him,' said Faizi; 'such a devout person should be near the house of God.'

'You infidel,' said Bir Bal with a laugh, 'you will yet have to pay for your heresies and your flights of unrestrained imagination.'

'Pooh,' said Faizi, 'may they be blessed by their orthodox faith. I see the divine light through the chinks of the tavern door; where other people see only a tavern I find the house of God.'

'What!' said Ghias Beg in surprise; 'you do not mean to say that you are fond of drink?'

'My friend,' said Faizi sweetly, 'I see the face of my beloved reflected in the wine cup, and so I have given myself up to intoxication. Wait until you also drink of the heavenly beverage which His Majesty has brewed for all true hearts.'

Further conversation was stopped as the doors of the banqueting hall were thrown open, and the Emperor took his seat on a marble throne.

The hall was redolent with perfumes, which thousands of scented candles and vases full of flowers emitted. Here was a candlestick with its double arms terminating in flowers, from which hundreds of candles rose as pistils and filled the air with fragrance. There stood another from the centre of which spread five flowering branches, with a dove delicately poised on each, holding

acorns in their beaks, from which flowed light and musky perfume.

Magnificent chandeliers, suspended from the gorgeously painted and gilded ceiling, suffused a rich lustre throughout the spacious apartment, which was reflected in the gems that sparkled in the garments of the guests.

The dasterkhan (table-cloth) was covered with refreshments of the most varied and tempting description, and replete with all that could please the eye and gratify the taste.

The Emperor, throwing off his usual reserve, freely joined in the conversation. A bevy of dancing girls of unsurpassed beauty and art, their airy figures clad in thin silks, embellished with exquisite gold lace, pirouetted and flitted about, and the melodies they poured out like nightingales mingled with the perfume of thousands of flowers, and rose to the heavens.

The guests soon lost themselves in this earthly Paradise, and were only awakened from their dream by the false phantom of the morning, which was heralded by the roaring of drums, when the Emperor retired and every one returned to his home.

‘Have you enjoyed yourself?’ inquired Malak Masud, when Ghias Beg took his seat beside him in the chariot.

‘I owe everything to you,’ replied Ghias Beg, ‘my life, my honour, my present position. How

generous, how benevolent the Emperor is, and how rich.'

'So rich,' replied Malak Masud, 'that four hundreds pairs of scales were once at work weighing his gold and jewels, and the total could not be made in five months. The treasure was then valued at nearly seventy millions of gold pieces, but it has been swelling since, and one cannot say what it is worth now. He deserves it all, for he is a kind master, a sincere friend, and as forgiving as a loving father. May God preserve him long to protect his people.'

'Amen,' said Ghias Beg heartily, and reaching home they retired to rest.

CHAPTER III

NEXT morning Ghias Beg joined the imperial staff, and in a very short time took up the duties of a general secretary. Such was his diligence and ability, that at the end of three years, Akbar raised him to the command of a thousand horse, and a year or two later appointed him Master of the Imperial Household. At the end of fifteen years, his genius and good fortune raised him to the office and title of Itmad-ud-Daulah (the Lord High Treasurer). Thus he, who had almost perished through mere want in the desert, became in a few years the first subject in India, while the Empress—the mother of Prince Salim—and the principal Rajput wife of Akbar, regarded his wife as her sister, and they often sat talking for hours together, whilst young Mihar-ul-Nissa sported about in the palace.

The passage of fifteen years had seen the tiny little child grow up into a surpassingly beautiful girl. Tall and graceful as a cypress, her face had a thousand charms, every change of expression adding to it a new beauty. Her soft, dark, melting eyes, like those of a gazelle in love time, were

shaded by delicately pencilled eyebrows, several shades darker than her eyes, and in strange contrast to the dazzling whiteness of her polished temples. Her long, raven hair curling into ringlets parted over an unusually high and spacious forehead of stainless purity. Lilies and roses seemed to blend in all their freshness in her complexion, and vied with each other in all their glory. Her delicately chiselled nose, small pouting lips, exquisitely moulded ears, chin just sufficiently elongated, cheeks softly rounded forming dimples, that even Persian poets failed to do anything like justice to her ravishing beauty, so that she now well deserved the name 'Mihar-ul-Nissa,' the 'Sun of Woman,' which Malak Masud had given her at birth.

One fine morning about this time, all the ladies of Akbar's harem gathered as usual in their lovely garden to hold their 'Mina Bazar.'

The garden was most beautifully laid out, the borders of its marble walks were variegated parterres, of lovely flowers which exhaled delicious perfumes, while in the centre a stream of water flowed through marble aqueducts, and rippled over diced marble miniature waterfalls, rising in many fountains of crystal jets, and falling in showers of pearls on the flowers growing beneath.

On one side of the court graceful vines twining round silver wires formed lovely arbours. Here and there were pomegranate trees resplendent

with ruby blossoms, while roses were everywhere filling the atmosphere with their delicate perfume.

At convenient places silver and gold tables sparkled with iced sherbet and fruits of the choicest varieties. But what made this garden a paradise was the fairy crowd that flitted through it like butterflies, making a most enchanting scene of living colour, light, and beauty.

Often Akbar sat with his wife in some quiet corner of this garden looking with pride and pleasure on the loveliest creatures of his realm, and marvelling at the power of the Creator who could evolve such beauteous forms.

As some charming figure in rustling silks passed before him, adjusting the veil, which hung like a filmy cobweb over her mass of hair, or some black almond shaped eye timidly glanced towards him and then suddenly turned away, or some slender aerial form, like that of a sylph, stopped coquetting with a flower, her deep languishing eyes fringed with jetty eyebrows, restlessly wandering from flower to flower, the garden must indeed have seemed to him a veritable paradise on earth.

As this was the first meeting of the year, it was unusually lively, mirth and music, laughter and song, were the order of the day. The ladies were moving about in groups, some were chatting together at the stalls which displayed articles of rare artistic beauty, while some were on swings whose silken ropes murmured beneath their light

burdens, while others carolled blithely as the birds in the neighbouring trees, whose sweet, untutored melody they seemed to emulate, and the liquid flow of their voices awakened and sustained a continuous series of musical echoes amidst the trees themselves.

Mihar-ul-Nissa and her mother were also present, and while her mother was chatting quietly with the Empress, Mihar-ul-Nissa sat apart from all at the edge of the fountain, idly swinging her feet in the limpid waters as they rose and fell in crystal wavelets.

She was beautifully dressed: her open caftan, embroidered by her own hand, fell in charming folds around her exquisite form, while her blue silk skirts added a charm of their own to her irresistible beauty, and contrasted with the white muslin veil which fell upon her shoulders.

Prince Salim, entering the garden quietly by a private door, lingered a while to feast his eyes on the fairy forms which moved about the garden, then rapidly passing round the courtyard, skirted the wall so as to maintain a respectful distance from the ladies, and turning a corner, he took a narrow gravel path which radiated from the central fountain, and began to promenade it. The trees meeting overhead, formed an archway which sheltered him from the sun.

Prince Salim was in his eighteenth year, tall and slender, his fine form faultlessly symmetrical, with

a broad chest and fine slender waist, his complexion would have been extremely fair, were it not for a shade of brown caused by exposure to the sun, which gave a certain manliness to his otherwise youthful appearance. His coal black hair naturally curled behind his high and noble forehead, his blue eyes, singularly keen and piercing, were shaded by jet black eyebrows, his aquiline nose delicately chiselled, showed a certain strength of character, while his fine full lips denoted strength and stern determination.

Though the Prince was very young, he was already addicted to pleasure and loved excitement. Polite and engaging in conversation, courteous and obliging in manner, he was nevertheless intensely selfish, and he often sat drinking for days and nights together. He was simply dressed, but everything about him bespoke refined taste and love of ease.

As the Prince was leisurely walking on the gravelled path, feasting his eyes on the fascinating scene which this truly Elysian garden presented, he suddenly came to the spot where Mihar-ul-Nissa sat bathing her feet in the translucent waters like the queen of the flowers which surrounded her.

Seeing the Prince approach, she hurriedly threw her muslin veil over her face and drew herself aside. The flowers which grew so luxuriantly round the fountain attracted Salim's fancy, and wishing to pluck some, but having two pigeons in

his hands, he could not do so without handing them to some one else. He looked round, and seeing Mihar-ul-Nissa seated near the fountain, came up to her and courteously said, 'Sister, will you kindly hold these pigeons for a few seconds, while I go and pick flowers.'

Mihar-ul-Nissa made no reply but quietly put forth her beautiful hands, and the Prince giving the pigeons to her, turned to pluck the flowers which had caught his fancy. After a little while he returned and asked for his pigeons, and she without saying a word raised her hands with only one pigeon in them.

'What,' cried the Prince, 'you have only one pigeon. Where is the other?'

'Flown away,' said Mihar-ul-Nissa in a mellifluous voice.

'But how?' asked the Prince a little excited and amazed.

'So,' was the reply, as she allowed the pigeon still in her hand to escape also. As she did so, in the excitement of the moment, her veil dropped and she shone upon him with all her charms. Her timid eyes fell upon the Prince and kindled all his soul with love. He was as one struck dumb, and as though enchanted. He could not believe his eyes, and as he looked at the crystal fountain, the umbrageous trees, and the fragrant flowers he took her for a fairy who had lost her way.

'Pardon me, sir,' said Mihar-ul-Nissa as a deep

blush mounted into her cheeks, 'the pigeon flew out of my hand unwittingly.'

'Oh, the pigeon,' murmured the Prince as if dazed, 'I had forgotten it. But pray tell me are you a fairy on a visit to this earth?'

'My father,' said the girl naïvely, 'is the Lord High Treasurer. His name is Mirza Ghias Beg, Itmad-ud-Daulah. Excuse me, sir, but I must go and join my mother.'

'Cruel one,' said the Prince, boldly seizing her hand, 'you have let my pigeon go, but ensnared my heart. Stay, oh stay with me.'

'Sir,' said Mihar-ul-Nissa, trying to disengage her hand, 'pray let me depart.'

'No, ah no,' said the Prince, 'surely you cannot wish to kill me outright. I can scarce believe my eyes,' he muttered to himself; 'my senses seem to have taken wings, and Cupid to be whispering congratulations in my ears for this midsummer madness.'

'I must go,' she said at last, a little impatiently. 'I can remain no longer with a stranger. Please let me go.'

'What can I do but obey?' said Salim in a voice full of pathos, 'I who would kiss the dust which your feet have touched.'

'Why do you mock me, Prince?' said Mihar-ul-Nissa innocently; 'it is not kind to treat me so.'

'It is you who have wounded me,' said the Prince warmly, 'with darts of love from your

brilliant eyes, and you now complain that it is I who mock you, and you ask why do I treat you so ? Dare I follow the impulse of my heart and whisper the words "I love you" ? '

He waited for a reply, but as she made none, he added, ' This is the worst of being a Prince, he is not credited with human feelings, and when his heart pours out its inmost truth, no one believes him. Every atom of my being cries out that it loves you, but you think that I sport with you and will not answer. Tell me that I am not utterly distasteful to you. Cast, at least, one kindly glance on me, or I think I shall go mad.'

' Prince,' said Mihar-ul-Nissa at last smiling sweetly, as she saw the proud Prince thus demeaning himself before her, ' methinks you have already sported sufficiently with the feelings of one you must have deemed a silly maiden.'

' A silly maiden !' cried Salim. ' I look up to you as the guiding star of my life. Since I have seen you, the world seems utterly changed to me. You torment me, and yet you complain that I am sporting with your feelings. I must indeed be mad.'

' Prince,' murmured the young girl, the sweet cadences of her voice entering the inmost recesses of his heart, ' I am a poor man's daughter. Please let me go.'

' Let you go ? never !' exclaimed the Prince, the very idea of her going away adding fuel to his

torture. 'I am in your hands. Do with me as you will.'

'Then leave me, please,' she said with some animation. 'If any one should happen to see us together I should be ruined. For who would venture to blame you?'

'Who would dare speak ill of you?' said Salim angrily. 'While I have yet the breath to do it, let me tell you that I love you with every throb of my heart. Like a moth I cannot rest without your light. My love consumes me as if it were a furnace.'

'You do not mean what you say,' she murmured softly, 'you are making a fool of me. Oh, sir, for pity's sake let me go.'

'With all my soul and heart and life I love you,' repeated the Prince. 'God is my witness, and I solemnly affirm that my heart pines to warm itself in your lovely presence. I call God as my witness that I have never seen any one who has made upon my soul such an impression as you have done. It was immediate. It was instantaneous. As my eyes rested on your lovely form my heart flamed up with love, and all else the world with all its pomps and vanities can offer became as dust and ashes in my mouth. With you I will conquer and rule the world, without you I will not live.'

'Prince,' said Mihar-ul-Nissa in calm and measured tones, 'you have said enough to convince me of your love, and I confess that I am not proof against it, but it cannot be earnest, it cannot be

lasting. It is mere whim that will pass away in a few days.'

'I am as earnest as a man can ever be,' said Salim, 'and I can prove my love here to you at this very moment, by sacrificing a life I can no longer call my own,' and thus saying he drew a dagger from his belt. It flashed and was about to pierce the heart of the desperate lover, when Mihar-ul-Nissa darted like an angel and snatched it from his hand.

'Prince,' she said in a loving tone, 'if you proffer me an honourable love, I can love you most fondly, most devotedly in return.'

'Say you so?' said the Prince, his face lighting up with joy. 'You promise to love me?'

'Yes,' she said; 'I cannot be insensible to love such as yours, but you know that I am in the hands of my parents, who can dispose of me like any of their other possessions, just as they choose.'

'Leave that to me,' said Salim beside himself with joy, his face beaming with rapture, as catching her in his arms, he strained her to his breast. Hurriedly she withdrew herself from his embrace, and with downcast looks and heaving breast, whispered tenderly, 'I will be yours, but leave me now.'

The Prince instantly obeyed and disappeared, while Mihar-ul-Nissa, after arranging her toilet a little, retreated to her mother, and in the evening they returned home in their palanquins.

CHAPTER IV

It was a beautiful night. A shower of rain had settled the dust, the stars twinkled in the pure, blue skies, while the mellow moonlight filled it with indescribable serenity and calm. Ghias Beg and his wife sat in the balcony of their house, below which murmured the soft waters of the Jumna, while the soothing gusts of the cool, fresh breeze opened their hearts as the flowers open after the first monsoon shower.

‘What a charming night,’ said Begum Ghias Beg. ‘I love the moonlight.’

‘It is lovely,’ echoed Ghias Beg. ‘But do you remember the night when we wandered on the hills, and even the beautiful moon seemed to frown upon us from the skies above, while the earth refused us shelter. It is strange that even the sublime beauties of the heavens fail to calm the mind when it is disturbed by petty wants.’

‘Why think of those miserable days on such a glorious night?’ said his wife as a shade fell on her face. ‘You have darkened my mind by awakening the sad memory of those wretched days. How wrong it was of us to think of deserting the child;

but it is remarkable that from the moment Mihar-ul-Nissa came into being we were taken care of.'

'Yes,' said Ghias Beg; 'fate seems to be preparing her for some great destiny. She is now only fifteen years of age, and yet she is so precocious that she knows more of the world and its ways than we do. She is such a contemplative child, and has great inventive genius. She can design and work new patterns which are prettier than any I have ever seen. I may well thank God for His mercy in giving me such boons as these. A master kind and good like Akbar, a wife sweet as yourself, and a child of such angelic beauty as Mihar-ul-Nissa.'

'And I may well thank God for giving me such a good and loving husband as you,' said the Begum. 'As for my Mihar-ul-Nissa, she is now growing into a woman, beautiful as the moon at its zenith. We must find a suitable match for her.'

'I have been thinking about it for a long time,' said her husband, 'and I have at last decided. I think you will approve of the match which I have made for her. You have heard of Ali Kuli Beg. He is such a gallant, good hearted young man, and is, also, a Persian. I have promised him the hand of my daughter.'

'Yet our kind benefactor Malak Masud predicted,' said the Begum, who had her own ambitions, 'that our little girl was destined to be

an empress, but Prince Salim has already been married.'

'Prince Salim,' interrupted Ghias Beg, the warm blood of indignation mounting into his cheeks, 'is a man of pleasure, a drunkard, and a rake. I would sooner perish than see my daughter married to calumny and dishonour. I would rather be the same homeless wanderer as before than sacrifice the happiness of my daughter to his unholy passion.'

'Noble husband,' said the Begum; 'a woman values nothing more than the undivided love of her husband, and to keep her fair fame unsullied is her highest consideration. We will not sell the happiness of our daughter for the gold of the Prince, but what if he were to offer an honourable love?'

'Honourable love!' exclaimed Ghias Beg hotly 'I know Prince Salim too well to expect such a thing from him. He is too much addicted to gaiety and pleasure, too fond of dissipation and irregular pursuits, to ever know real love, or think of it seriously. Though so young, he is an utter voluptuary. Besides I have promised the hand of my daughter to Ali Kuli Beg, a gallant young man, who is sure to love Mihar-ul-Nissa as only a soldier can love, and cherish her as the apple of his eye, and I hope she will love him in return for the sterling qualities of his heart.'

'You are so wise,' said his wife, 'and I am sure it will be for her happiness.'

‘Ali Kuli Beg,’ went on her husband, ‘is older than our Mihar-ul-Nissa, but he is still a young man, though he has already established a reputation second to none in the army.’

‘Yes, I have often heard you speak in his praise,’ said the Begum: ‘he is said to be a very brave soldier. I wonder if he is as handsome as our daughter.’

‘Not so handsome as that,’ said Ghias Beg, ‘but he is fairly good looking, and Mihar-ul-Nissa would learn to love him, when she knows him a little. He, too, was driven from home by persecution and political changes, and when he joined the army he was as poor as ourselves, but such was his merit that he has now a well-established position of his own, and this has prepossessed me all the more in his favour. He has been raised by the Emperor to the command of a thousand horse.’

‘Well then,’ said the Begum, ‘all that remains to be done is formally to betroth her to Ali Kuli Beg according to our customs.’

‘Yes,’ said Ghias Beg; ‘and that means a great deal of fuss. I am a quiet man, and hate all tumult and show. But I shall have to put up with that, I suppose.’

‘Of course you will,’ responded his wife. ‘My daughter must be betrothed with all the splendour befitting our rank.’

‘You do not know, dearest,’ said Ghias Beg

languidly, 'how trying it will be for me to put up with it all. I do not mind the expense, what irritates me is the noise and discomfort, which does not allow one to have a quiet hour, and the home is changed into a veritable serai.'

'Oh,' said the Begum coaxingly, 'you cannot grudge a little hospitality and a chance to afford our friends a little enjoyment, and some mirth for Mihar-ul-Nissa's girl companions. That is my department, and I will do what I can to make my guests comfortable and happy. You may, if you please, shut your male guests in a room and talk dry philosophy to them.'

'I am afraid,' said Ghias Beg laughing, 'that my friends will not be content with dry, philosophic talk. They, too, must have some diversions, and I shall have to arrange for that.'

'I will speak to Mihar-ul-Nissa about her betrothal,' said Begum Ghias. 'She is such an intelligent girl, it will be good to consult her wishes. I am told that Hindus allowed their daughters to select their own husbands.'

'So they did,' replied Ghias Beg, 'but they found their mistake and had to give up the custom. A young girl may take a fancy to a heartless man, misled by physical beauty and her own blind emotions, while according to our custom a girl receives the benefit of the mature judgment of her parents, who look at the question from all sides, and are better able to judge of the real worth of a

man than a young, artless, inexperienced girl. It will be no use speaking to Mihar-ul-Nissa about it. She is a good, obedient child, and will go where we send her.'

'True,' said Begum Ghias. 'But the parents are sometimes actuated by other motives than the wellbeing of their girls. The rank, wealth, and social position of the parents enter more into their thoughts than the qualities of the boy; and often the happiness of the girl is for all her life sacrificed for other considerations; and she lingers on, doomed to misery as if the curse of heaven was upon her, and she blames her parents. According to the Hindu custom the girl, if she made a mistake, an unhappy choice, had no one to blame but herself, and when we recognise our mistake we grow patient and resigned, but when we find ourselves suffering through the mistaken actions of others, we rebel against our fate, and thus become still more miserable.'

'There is some truth in what you say,' replied her husband, 'but the idea of allowing a young girl to select her own partner does not appeal to me. She may select any good-looking, fast-going rake. I admit that sometimes parents are actuated by other motives than the thought of the wellbeing of their own girl, and some marriages take place under mistaken notions. The Hindus must have found their system bad, otherwise they would not have abandoned it.'

‘ You must own, dear husband,’ said the Begum with some warmth, ‘ that at least the Hindus regarded women as possessing some discretion and judgment, a heart and soul of their own, which they could do with as they liked, but you treat women as toys to break and discard at your pleasure. It is not men we have to thank for the influence we exercise, even under such adverse circumstances, but our own intrinsic worth which subdues their hearts and rules them still.’

‘ As you rule my heart, my queen,’ said Ghias Beg lovingly. ‘ But if the women could exercise their own judgment in the selection of their husbands, how was it that the Hindus, who stick to their customs so tenaciously, had to give it up ? ’

‘ When light and truth departed from the Hindus,’ said his wife, ‘ they became what you see them now. I am told that it was not any defect in the custom which led them to change it, but the high-handedness of some of the Moslem governments, which caused so much mischief and misery, fear and distrust, that the Hindus had to keep their women within closed doors to save the honour of their wives and daughters.’

‘ I am ashamed to own,’ added Ghias Beg, ‘ that the Moslems when they first came to India behaved like brutes, and the horrible massacres of innocent men and women in cold blood are awful to contemplate. Their hearts were made of flint, perhaps, and they did not feel all the misery and

distress in which they held their feasts and celebrated their victories.'

'Does a hunter feel for a deer when he wishes to spear it?' asked the Begum. 'The thought of the pain he is inflicting never occurs to him, so full is his mind of his own self, and its gratification, that as long as he can indulge his own whim, he cares nothing for the suffering his selfishness may cause. The same sort of feeling must have dominated the Moslem conquerors.'

'It must have been so,' replied her husband; 'but thank heaven there have been some really good kings, whose impartiality and justice won the love and respect of all people.'

'I do not know,' said Begum Ghias; 'some Moslems seem to be proud of their savage kings. The other day I was talking to the wife of the Shaikh-ul-Sadar, and she spoke most highly of those cruel tyrants, while calling our good and beloved sovereign a heretic. I tried to keep quiet, but could not, and so I told her what I thought of her ideas. It is a wicked world, that even so just and good an Emperor as ours cannot escape calumny.'

'They are interested people,' he replied, 'who calumniate our beloved Emperor. The outer world knows nothing about his struggles and endeavours for the wellbeing of his people. Our Emperor is actuated by the highest motives, he sees things from a standpoint which the common

run of men can hardly attain, and then, what is more, he rules the country, not for himself, but for his people. He has revolutionised the whole country, the whole system of government. "God," he says often, "has sent me, not for the gratification of my own desires, but for the guidance and government of my people.' He is really indefatigable in his attempts to unite the heterogeneous people into a compact nation. Who could ever think of an Emperor retiring late to bed, and then up again at four A.M. busy with his work.'

'Do you think it was unwise of the Emperor to break with the orthodox Moslems?'

'He could not help it,' said Ghias Beg with a sigh; 'he tried to keep on as long as possible, but he could not allow the Shaikh-ul-Sadar to sit and contemplate the tortures which he inflicted, nor could he be a hypocrite. He wished boldly to place before his subjects a high ideal, he culled from every creed the best articles of faith, and on this he formed his own divine religion, and then decreed that in his eyes Hindu and Mahomedan were alike, that even the dog was clean, and that they may taste swine flesh if they so wished, and drink wine if it pleased them. It mattered little to him what they did, so long as they did not abandon the path of virtue.'

'How happy the whole country is under him. He seems to have changed the deserted country into a garden, by the wave of his magician's wand,'

exclaimed the Begum ; ‘ and it seems that some bright ray of the sun has descended into his heart, as people allege, which enables him to know truth from falsehood and to recognise the real worth of every man. We came here homeless wanderers, and he raised you to rank and dignity which you well deserved.’

‘ I know my unworthiness,’ said Ghias Beg modestly. ‘ I am the same person who was noted for his incapacity in his own country, but there is no doubt that the Emperor seems to attract great men around him like a magnet. Deep thinkers like Abul Fazal, poets like Faizi, financiers like Todar Mal, soldiers like Man Singh, and councillors like Bir Bal, adorn his courts, all inspired by the same selfless devotion for work and the wellbeing of the country, which is characteristic of the Emperor. A country which can produce men like these may well have a great future before it.’

‘ I have read all the poems of Faizi,’ said the Begum ; ‘ he is sublime in his ideas, yet sings as a nightingale.’

‘ He is a born poet,’ said Ghias Beg, ‘ his thoughts flow like a mountain torrent under flashing sunbeams. You know he was brought to the Emperor as a prisoner, and when the Emperor questioned him, he broke out into verse. The Emperor was pleased and allowed him a place in the Durbar, and since then they have never been parted for a day.’

‘Faizi is most charming,’ said the Begum, ‘but the brother Abul Fazal is too philosophical for me. He delights in expressing his thoughts in a hard, high-flown style, while Faizi speaks to you directly and at once enters your heart. He sees the reflection of all things in all their inner glory, and makes them live in word pictures, so that he opens out a new world for us and makes visible what is usually far too high above our ken, while Abul Fazal sees things through intellect, and is never satisfied with his own discoveries unless he can form some workable theories to support them. His path is the path of intellect, intricate and difficult, while Faizi appeals to the emotions and leads straight to the heart of things. It must be so, dear husband,’ added Begum Ghias. ‘You called Bir Bal a councillor just now. He is known to us as a mere humorist.’

‘Can you think that a king like Akbar would regard as a friend a mere wit?’ asked Ghias Beg. ‘Bir Bal is a man who can see far into the future, and his wit enables him to view both sides of a question. Often when the councillors have discussed all the pros and cons of a question and decided on a certain course of action, Bir Bal speaks out in his own humorous way, and demolishes the whole thing by exposing all the weak points in it.’

‘You, too, my husband,’ said Begum Ghias

approvingly, 'form an ornament of the brilliant court of his Majesty.'

'I am doing my best,' said Ghias Beg, 'to carry out the wishes of His Majesty in my own department, but alas, the temple of peace, love, and justice, which the Emperor has raised, seems to stand on a sandy foundation, and must crumble to dust when the brain that has planned it and the mighty hand that has raised it into a sacred fane is no more. There is no hope of the continuity of his work, and it saddens me to think that he and his friends are working in vain. What surprises me most is that He, the divine Lord, Who guides the destinies of nations, allows chance to play with good and noble work.'

'He knows best,' said his wife devoutly, 'and our finite reason cannot understand His infinite ways. It is enough to know that we are in His divine hands, and that His love is infinite like His infinite nature. May it not be that the people, by not accepting the high teachings of Akbar, have shown their unfitness for a higher and nobler social life?'

'The system of hereditary kingship is extremely defective,' said Ghias Beg. 'King Tehmasaph loved my father as a brother, and his son drove me out of the kingdom. King Tehmasaph liked good and wise men, while his son cares only for wild, dissolute youths, and the administration of justice must consequently suffer. I am told that

the Hindus in olden times elected their kings for definite periods, and thus were able to have the ablest men at the head of their government.'

'You are right, my dear husband,' said his wife; 'such a system would do away with the anomaly which results from the hereditary system. I am told that the people in Feringistan (England) have such a system still in vogue, and for centuries the people have enjoyed peace and freedom denied to us and to other countries. They are said to be a nation of heroes.'

'Our Prince Salim,' said Ghias Beg, 'is wayward, a wild sort of man, and I pray to God that He may lead him to the right path, so that the work for which the noble Akbar and his coadjutors have laboured may not crumble into pieces.'

A roar of thunder came as a response to his prayer. They had been so interested in their conversation that they had not noticed the black clouds which had advanced and obscured the moon, and now, with flashing of lightning, the rain came down in torrents. The time for prayer had also come, and Ghias Beg and his wife fell on their knees to thank God for His goodness, and then retired to rest.

CHAPTER V

It was a lovely Sunday in the month of Sawan (August) when Begum Ghias and the charming Mihar-ul-Nissa stepped into their palanquins with gold embroidered velvet covers and silver and gold poles. Sixteen bearers in scarlet liveries carried them swiftly to the imperial seraglio. Passing the portico and through the palace gardens, they reached the outer gate, where a batch of amazons relieved the male bearers and bore them to the vestibule of the ladies' apartments, where the visitors stepped out and walked through another antechamber paved with marble and many-hued mosaics. A number of dark-complexioned girls welcomed them with delighted and graceful bows, but passing through this beautiful chamber they entered the open courtyard, where Jodha Bai, the favourite wife of Akbar, and the other ladies of the harem were celebrating the festival of Tijia.

Though the seraglio always echoed with mirth and song, dance and music, yet in Sawan (August), when dimpled thunder clouds changed the leaden summer skies into beautiful, blue heavens, and

soft showers enamelled the parched earth with emerald green, when the Peepeeha (cuckoo) sang in the mango trees, as its leaves, which had withered in the summer winds, rustled in the cool, fresh breeze, and cried in low, shrill tones ' Peekahan,' where is my love ? when even the poor peasant women, ill-fed and ill-clad, could not help bursting out into song, the mirth in the harem knew no bounds.

It was a delightful morning. A gentle breeze was softly blowing as the rain fell, and the ladies of the harem in their various and brilliant coloured garb looked like flowers sprung out of the white marble floor. Drops of rain resting on the marble screens gleamed like pearls as the sun shot out from the clouds and shone on the floral designs in gold and mosaic of the screens. The young ladies were singing, chatting and laughing, throwing flowers and fruits at each other, and posing in different attitudes. Swings murmured under their light weight, as they swayed backwards and forwards, singing sweetly.

Jodha Bai was reclining on a sofa of gold inlaid with jewels, and upholstered with cloth of gold fringed with pearls. Though a little over forty years of age, she still retained her superb beauty, her limbs were light and lovely, her countenance bewitching, her hair coal black, and her eyes matchless, while her form still retained the grace of youth.

The Emperor loved her with his whole heart, and preferred one ringlet of her hair to the throne of the world. More than a hundred maids were in attendance, fanning the guests, filling the air with the sweet perfume of attar-of-roses, serving cardamons and perfumed betel, or preparing hinna to colour their finger-ends.

Mihar-ul-Nissa and her mother made their salaams to the Empress. The Begum took a seat near Jodha Bai, while Mihar-ul-Nissa joined a party of young girls. She took a sitar, and as her fingers passed over its strings it gave forth wonderful music. Now its short merry melodies awakened joyful aspirations, loving emotions, and sanguine hopes, now it broke forth into melancholy sounds, becoming an image of anguish, soul-consuming despair, then again changing into blissful strains breathing of peace and rest. She laid aside the sitar and began to dance, her delicate form bending, her hands thrown out as if in supplication, the silver bells on her ankles tinkling in harmony with her voice as she sang from Omar Khayyam, her feet keeping time to the music, and her voice full of pathos and passion giving life to the words which dropped from her lips :

‘ Alas, that spring should vanish with the rose,
That youth’s sweet scented manuscript should close.
The nightingale that in the branches sang,
Ah, whence and whither flown again, who knows ?

Ah, love, could thou and I with fate conspire,
To grasp this sorry scheme of things entire,
Would we not shatter it to bits, and then
Remould it nearer to our heart's desire ?

Ah, moon of my delight, who knowest no wane,
The moon of heaven is rising once again,
How oft, hereafter rising, shall she look
Through this same garden after me in vain.

And when thyself with shining foot shall pass
Among the guests, star scattered on the grass,
And in thy joyous errand reach a spot
Where I made one. Turn down an empty glass.'

The strain was ill suited to the gay time and place where it was sung, but all the ladies were enthusiastic in their admiration. There was also a listener sitting behind the heavy curtains of an adjacent room, who was in raptures, whose heart was thrilled to its innermost recesses. Prince Salim, having seen the palanquins, had stepped into an ante-room and could see all that was going on in the hall. She played and he was in raptures : she sang and he was bewitched : she danced and he was in ecstasy. The last echoes of her rich notes floated down the chamber and slowly died away, but in the heart of the Prince they dwelt for ever after. He stood with difficulty, and flung himself on a couch.

'Come near me, dear Mihar-ul-Nissa,' said Jodha Bai, patting her cheek ; 'your song has

thrilled me ; your voice is sweet and plaintive as that of a nightingale.'

'So sweet,' said another lady, 'that we sat silent and enchanted. Our very hearts stopped to receive her impassioned, honeyed notes.'

'Begum Ghias may well be proud of her lovely daughter,' added Jodha Bai, as her black eyes rested with admiration on her lovely guest ; 'I wonder if she will ever find an equally lovely husband for her.'

'Noble Empress,' said the Begum, 'my husband told me last night that he has promised her hand in marriage to Ali Kuli Beg, a young Persian officer in his Majesty's army, who my husband says will make a really good son-in-law.'

'The question,' said Jodha Bai, 'is not whether he will make a good son-in-law, but whether he will suit Mihar-ul-Nissa, inspire her with love, and cherish her as the apple of his eye. He is a very brave soldier I am told, but so stiff a man can have no pretensions to beauty, art, or poetry : a man who cannot make a good courtier cannot be a lady's man. You ought to have consulted me before deciding.'

'How could I do so, gracious Queen,' replied the Begum, 'when her father spoke to me about it only last night ? I myself did not like the idea, but what could I do ? He had decided it, he is wise, and I hope all will yet go well.'

'I hope so,' said Jodha Bai. 'What is done

cannot be undone, but somehow I cannot approve of the match. I cannot think of our delicate Mihar-ul-Nissa being the wife of a rough, matter-of-fact soldier like Ali Kuli Beg. Yet poor Mihar-ul-Nissa must go where her parents send her.'

'That is the custom of our country,' said Begum Ghias, 'and even the Hindus, who once allowed their daughters to select their own husbands, have been doing the same for ages.'

'And yet it was a beautiful custom,' said Jodha Bai, 'the girl put the garland of flowers on the neck of the youth she selected, whom she married forthwith.'

'I said so to my husband,' said Begum Ghias, 'but he does not seem to like the idea; he says that a young girl can scarcely judge the qualities of a youth, and is blindly guided by passion.'

'He is wrong,' said Jodha Bai, with animation, 'the heart can judge better than the head. What does a man know of a woman's heart? It is absurd of a man to think of trying to suit a woman with a husband.'

'It is our cruel laws,' said another lady with a sigh, 'that allow men to dispose of us as if we had no hearts, feelings, or emotions.'

'What is more,' added Jodha Bai, 'they think that the heart like a chameleon can change colour to suit different conditions.'

'Quite so,' said Begum Ghias, 'but what can

we do ? The custom is an old one, and cannot be overridden in any case.'

'It was disregarded in mine,' said Jodha Bai. 'Love conquers all.'

'In my country,' said Mary, the European wife of Akbar, 'the girls select their own husbands, the women go out with the men and mix freely with each other, and enjoy themselves as much as men do.'

'How beautiful it must be,' said Jodha Bai with a sigh, 'to go freely and see those lovely fields ; here shut up in these marble walls we see nothing, and know nothing of the outer world, except what we can see through our screens.'

'My husband,' interposed Begum Ghias Beg, 'says that it is not lawful for a woman to speak to another man, nor to show her face to a stranger.'

'I don't know,' said Mary, 'our women are as virtuous as yours, while here the presence of a man excites ideas which in my country are never dreamt of.'

'It must be so,' remarked Jodha Bai, 'the women in your country must be strong-willed and able to take care of themselves, while we are entirely at the mercy of men ; self-reliance is a thing quite unknown to us.'

'According to our law,' said Mary, 'a man is not allowed to have more than one wife ; if he

does so, he is sent to prison ; even a king cannot transgress the law.'

'Your people must be very good,' said Jodha Bai, 'and what need is there for them to marry other women, when the first marriage is a tie formed by love, which must endure for ever. The Emperor is for more freedom and better laws, but he says the people as a whole are not prepared for a radical change ; he hopes that when he succeeds in uniting the different races and obliterating sectarianism and all ill-grounded beliefs he will be able to do something.'

'His Majesty is right,' said Mary, 'but I beg leave to differ from His Majesty as to the advisability of waiting for the solution of the question ; the high ideal must be placed before the people now, and it will by its own innate power purify and draw them to itself.'

'You are so wise,' remarked Jodha Bai, 'and I hope the Emperor will have time to carry out his reforms. He has to go against every one, and only He who knows his good intentions gives him strength to accomplish such things as had never been dreamt of in this custom-ridden country. Yet sometimes even he feels very wretched and in despair.'

Mihar-ul-Nissa, who had been dreaming of Salim and his love, and weaving around it all her happiness, was struck as if a flash of lightning had changed her living youthful form into a corpse,

when she heard of her betrothal to another. The rosy bloom of her cheek turned into ashen whiteness ; her delicate vermilion lips, which a few minutes before were wreathed with smiles, were now white and set, as if some diabolical power had closed them for ever. She stood rooted to the ground, listening unconsciously to what was being said about her ; and then, gathering up her strength, she stepped into a room close by, where she fell on an ottoman, like one from whom life and happiness had departed to return no more, little expecting to find Prince Salim there.

Prince Salim had also heard what had passed between his mother and Begum Ghias. The words fell on him like darts, and he lay like one thrown down from heaven itself ; and when he saw Mihar-ul-Nissa lift the curtain and enter, every pulse of his fine frame beat in response to her footfall, and all his mighty love rose like a river, and for a moment swept away the tortures which tormented his love-sick soul. His heart leapt with joy when he saw her lying on an ottoman close by, and rising from his couch he approached her, and threw himself on his knees before her.

Mihar-ul-Nissa was surprised at his sudden appearance, and moved as if to rise ; but he looked up at her in such loving entreaty, that she remained seated, and they gazed at each other scarcely able to utter a word, their pent-up love pouring out from their deep, longing eyes in streams of living light.

‘ Pardon me a thousand times, I implore,’ said Prince Salim in a voice choked with emotion, ‘ but I do beseech you grant me a few moments’ attention.’

‘ Prince,’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa, recovering at last the power of speech which the suddenness of his appearance and the emotions which it called up had temporarily suspended, ‘ I have nothing to pardon, but have you no diversions this morning with which to amuse yourself ? ’

‘ My love, dearer than life,’ murmured Prince Salim, ‘ since I have seen you I can find no rest, no pleasure anywhere, my heart only wished to be near you.’

‘ But why should you seek me ? ’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa in a taunting tone. ‘ Do let me alone.’

‘ You know my suffering,’ said the Prince, hardly able to speak, with a pained, longing look, ‘ and yet you try to increase my pain. When I see you, my love for you increases more and more ; you don’t try to cure me ; perhaps you have never known pain yourself ? ’

‘ You say, Prince,’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa in a tone full of pain and suffering, ‘ that I don’t know pain, when my stock of happiness has been burnt up as if by a sudden flash of lightning. Go, enjoy yourself, but tease me not by your light flatteries.’

‘ You have pierced my heart by love, and it is bleeding to death,’ said the Prince ; ‘ yet you call my declarations light flatteries.’

‘ You have been eavesdropping, Prince,’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa angrily, ‘ you know all. You have heard what passed between my mother and the Empress ; so have pity on me, for God’s sake, and leave me alone.’

‘ I heard all, I confess,’ said Prince Salim, ‘ and God knows how I have suffered ; but tell me that you love me, and I will sweep away all barriers, and you shall yet be mine.’

‘ I told you so the first day we met,’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa, raising her eyes to his, and blushing deeply, ‘ women are not fickle like men. When they love, they love with all their hearts, all their life long ; while some men take women like toys, to be thrown aside when they cease to please.’

‘ You love me, you do,’ exclaimed Prince Salim, clasping Mihar-ul-Nissa’s hand, and raising it to his lips. ‘ My love for you is no mere fancy, but something deep, indescribable, everlasting, which burns like a flame of fire in my heart, consuming all petty selfish ideas. I have been very lax,’ added he, looking down, ‘ and I often thought that I loved, but I did not know what love was until I saw you. I will ask your father to break the engagement with Ali Kuli Beg, and if he refuses to do so, I will ask my father to annul it.’

‘ I also will speak to my parents,’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa in a determined tone, ‘ and they cannot be so cruel as to condemn me to eternal misery.’

‘Be comforted, dearest,’ said the Prince. ‘The cold breath of the enemy can have no effect on our warm love. “When man and woman are agreed, what can the Kazi do?”’

‘You do not know my father’s nature,’ rejoined Mihar-ul-Nissa; ‘he can be very obstinate and dogmatic.’

‘He dare not refuse me,’ replied Salim; ‘he is not fool enough to risk my displeasure.’

‘I am not sure of that,’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa; ‘he is a strange man.’

‘How can you believe that I can pass my life without you?’ said Salim, ‘when my life draws its strength from you alone? If I live you must be mine, and as long as blood flows through my veins, I will not endure the idea of your passing your life separate from me.’

Thus saying, he took his seat on an ottoman near Mihar-ul-Nissa, and putting his arm round her slender waist, while their lips met in a sweet loving kiss, their hearts beat in unison with each other, and they not only felt the emotions which swelled within them, but an undefined and electric sympathy which in uniting them to each other divided them from all the world.

‘To be loved and caressed by you,’ murmured Prince Salim, ‘is all that I care for in this world. I would rather have thee than this vast empire, for with you even a hamlet would be paradise for me.’

‘Fate seemed to have willed otherwise,’ sighed Mihar-ul-Nissa, ‘it is pre-ordained and irrevocable. You will soon be an Emperor, and will find many diversions to amuse yourself and forget me, while I can never, never forget my first love.’

‘Forget you!’ exclaimed Salim; ‘if I could lay bare my heart you would see your image fills it through and through. Forget you, indeed! I would sooner forget myself than you, who are the very essence of my life. As for that rude Persian, if he dares to cross my path, he will find his head rolling in the dust.’

Mihar-ul-Nissa was about to make a reply when the door flew open and they saw Begum Ghias Beg standing in front of them, trembling with rage; her eyes shot fire, and they quailed before her angry look.

‘Prince,’ she said, stepping forward, ‘I am surprised at you. You—who ought to set an example to your people—playing with the feelings of my foolish, innocent daughter, in broad daylight, and next to your own mother’s apartments; it ill becomes you.’

‘Listen to me,’ said the Prince, ‘I implore you to give me a hearing.’

‘They say, sire,’ interrupted the Begum, ‘that no mirror is required to reflect what you see with your own eyes. I would rather not hear you. Come, Mihar-ul-Nissa.’

‘Mihar-ul-Nissa herself, madam,’ said Salim,

‘ will do me the justice to admit that I have said nothing to offend or displease her.’

‘ Mother,’ interposed Mihar-ul-Nissa.

‘ Silence, wretch,’ exclaimed the mother, and then turning to the Prince, added, ‘ You have no justification for forcing yourself upon my daughter in this manner.’

Thus saying, holding firmly the hand of Mihar-ul-Nissa, she led her to the boudoir of the queen, where she had retired for rest after the morning festival was over.

‘ Gracious Empress,’ said the Begum approaching Jodha Bai, and bursting into tears, ‘ this is a wicked world, and the peach-like bloom of character is easily rubbed away. My daughter was resting in the adjoining room when Prince Salim forced himself into her presence, and when I went to look for her, I found them seated side by side in intimate converse. The fair flower of virtue once plucked blooms no more. The Prince should set an example of good conduct to his subjects, and it is exclusively in your royal power to take such measures with him as you think will be to his own as well as to the kingdom’s benefit.’

‘ My son is in the heyday of youth,’ said Jodha Bai, with all the love of a mother finding expression in her words, ‘ and youth is head-strong, but I behold sparks of greatness in him. Let me assure you that we will not allow him to

indulge in this sort of idle humour, and he must set an example to the youths of this country. He shall be reproved, but pray do not speak about it to anybody else. It is extremely fortunate that only you saw them together.'

'I will obey you,' said Begum Ghias, making a bow; 'the course which is agreeable to your feelings will also prove the wisest and the best.'

'Prince Salim shall make amends,' said Jodha Bai, 'for such foolish behaviour, but let me remind you again that it must be kept secret.'

'You may rely upon me as to that,' replied Begum Ghias. 'You have always been so kind to me, and even now you wish to preserve the honour of my daughter from babbling tongues.'

'His Majesty has just sent word,' added Jodha Bai, 'that he will grace our festival with his presence this evening. It will be delightful to have him.'

'Then we had better take our leave of you now,' said the Begum, 'for you will be very busy.'

'Yes,' replied Jodha Bai, 'I have to see that adequate preparations are made so that the festival may be really pleasing. I wish you good-bye.'

Begum Ghias bowed and kissed the hand of the Empress with respect, and was about to take her

departure, when Mihar-ul-Nissa fell on her knees and said :—

‘Do listen to my prayer, gracious Empress. I am sure you cannot be so hard hearted as my parents. Your son loves me truly, devotedly, and,’ she added with downcast eyes, ‘I am not indifferent to his love. The first day we met each other, love sprang up at first sight, and I promised to give my hand to the Prince in marriage. The Prince did not force himself upon me as my mother says, he came because he loves me and I love him. You who have known love yourself, I hope will make allowances for what I have said, for my unmaidenly declaration of love. I love the Prince and I appeal to you as the Empress of this great country, as the mother of the Prince, whose happiness must be dear to you, to save us from the crowning misery which my parents wish to inflict upon me. They want me to marry a man whom I know not, whom I cannot love, for my heart is closed against all men, but they seem to think that the heart, like a weathercock, can respond to varying gusts of air. You have been a real mother to me always, and I appeal to you to save me and protect me, and I pray you not to allow my cruel parents to blight my life, my happiness.’

Begum Ghias stood with her mouth open, her heart bursting with anger as she stared with amazement at her daughter. At last she sank

to the ground, and in a flood of tears, cried, 'Would to heaven you had never been born, to bring shame on your parents.'

'Be not hasty,' said Jodha Bai calmly, who had been greatly affected by Mihar-ul-Nissa's narrative, 'when the heart is full it forgets petty conventionalities. Are you angry because poor Mihar-ul-Nissa has opened her heart to me? Why should she not confide in me? Is she not my daughter? Begum Ghias, you are for once unreasonable. You do not seem to know what love is, you cannot have experienced it yourself.'

'I was a child when I married my husband,' said the Begum with some pride, 'and I have loved him ever since. What other love can a woman ever wish to know?'

'That is why you cannot sympathise with your daughter,' replied Jodha Bai. 'Be patient with her like a mother should, and all will be well. Leave the whole thing in my hands,' and then turning to the girl, she added, 'You have done well in telling me all. Your affair is my own, so calm yourself and trust in God who works always for the good of His creatures, and it will be as He wills. Let me assure you that I will do my best to promote your happiness.'

'Thanks, thanks,' broke in Mihar-ul-Nissa, a sob choking her voice, 'may He in His mercy reward you for giving me hope, nay, life. You

are truly my mother, and all that you do will be for my good.'

Begum Ghias then bowed again, and taking her daughter by the hand, they walked to where their palanquins were waiting and returned home.

CHAPTER VI

THE festival of the evening eclipsed in splendour that of the morning. The magic of countless little lamps transformed the Jasmine Tower into a mass of glowing flowers. The polished marble walls reflected the light of the myriads of lamps which glittered on innumerable minarets and shone like tiny stars in the rushing waters of the Jumna below. The *araq* of roses which the fountain softly threw up splashed into drops, and came down like showers of pearls in the many-hued lights from gorgeous chandeliers. The flood of light which flowed out from the fine lattice work of marble looked from a distance like a luminous river in a cloud of gold dust.

The marble floor, strewn ankle deep with fresh roses and covered with a delicate net of gold, sent up sweet perfume, as fair forms radiant with many-hued jewels trod upon it, bending low in the presence of one man, as bends before the wind a field of golden corn with its scarlet poppies, blue corn flowers, and white oxeyes.

Emperor Akbar seemed to have caught the contagion and was in a gay, light mood, mixing

freely with the pretty, laughing groups, and being greeted with song and laughter. The ladies of the harem chased each other in a varying dance of coyness and boldness, in a sort of lover's pursuit, looking like opalescent pearls strung together as they circled round in quick succession, linked hand in hand, their glistening locks falling on their brows like silken threads to entangle and captivate the heart of the onlooker.

The Emperor at last seated himself on a couch of gold with Jodha Bai, who presided like a goddess over this festival of fairies. She was gaily but tastefully dressed and she sparkled with costly jewels. A pair of priceless ear-rings hung from her delicate ears, while a magnificent necklace fell on her swelling bosom. A blue sari of the rarest silk floated round her like a fleecy cloud about the moon. The board was spread before them with a thousand dishes, containing refreshing drinks and other delicacies.

'How is it,' inquired Akbar, 'that you have all the time been somewhat thoughtful? What has occurred to ruffle your sunny spirit?'

'Nothing much,' replied Jodha Bai, adding with a sigh, 'although I must confess that my mind has been a little troubled.'

'About what?' anxiously inquired Akbar.

'I have no secrets from you,' replied Jodha Bai. 'I am rather puzzled over an affair which

to me is of deep interest, and you, perhaps, may be able to help me out of it.'

'Pray do not keep me in suspense,' exclaimed Akbar. 'It pains me to see you in such a mood. I cannot endure it.'

'It is all about a love affair,' laughed Jodha Bai.

'I see,' said Akbar, 'you want to play a joke upon me.'

'Not so,' answered Jodha Bai. 'You have seen Mihar-ul-Nissa, have you not, the charming daughter of Mirza Ghias Beg?'

'Ah yes,' said Akbar, 'she was singing so sweetly to you the other day. She embroiders those beautiful little things which command such a sale at the Nina Bazar, does she not?'

'The same,' said Jodha Bai, 'and to be brief, Salim has fallen in love with her.'

'It does not surprise me at all,' remarked the Emperor, 'even a saint could not resist her beauty and charm of manner. She will make a great queen, and you ought to be pleased, nay proud, to have such an accomplished daughter-in-law. I give my consent with pleasure, and I am sure you approve of the match.'

'Ask me not, I am your Majesty's guest,' laughed Jodha Bai. 'It is not a question of our consent, but there are other things which have to be considered.'

'Love can melt even steel if hot enough,'

replied Akbar light-heartedly. 'When I fell in love with you, who could have thought of my winning the consent of your proud parents and you as my wife? And yet love surmounted all difficulties and you are mine after all. Was it not a miracle to have won them over? Yet I never said a word to displease them or to show my power or authority. I conquered them by love and devotion, and when I told them that my happiness, my life was in their hands, they had not the heart to refuse, but resolved to sacrifice their own social position to make me happy. True to the end, the Rajputs are a wonderful people: once you win their friendship, they forget their own kith and kin to stand by you. I am proud to have them as my friends, councillors, and relatives.'

'A truce to your compliments,' said Jodha Bai, with a sigh. 'It was a terrible trial for me, for I was pining to death, and though you bade me take heart, I felt that it was all a delusion. I knew my parents, and so my only hope was in death, to relieve me from the terrible agony. Truly love is all conquering: the power of love is stronger than that of the sword. Had you tried to use your authority, they would have committed "Johar" (when Rajputs are hard pressed they kill their women and then die fighting) rather than have submitted, but they were powerless against love.'

‘I wish to rule this great kingdom through love,’ said Akbar. ‘I wish to kindle the fire of love in the hearts of all my subjects, to burn away all differences which separate brother from brother and father from son. I have told them, nay, demonstrated to the world, that there is only one God, the God of love, and the only path leading to Him, the path of devotion, though there are many modes of worshipping Him. May the lesson bear fruit and unite these heterogeneous, wrong-thinking, narrow-minded, blind people into an united Indian nation.’

‘Amen,’ said Jodha Bai. ‘God who watches the destiny of the nations is sure to bring up and nourish the seedling which you have planted.’

‘And yet,’ murmured the Emperor, ‘it seems to me sometimes that all I have done, and may be able to do, is useless; some strange fate seems to govern the destinies of this unfortunate continent, which has turned to nought the work of great men like Buddha, Sri Krishna, and Sankara Charya.’

‘There is nothing lost,’ said Jodha Bai, ‘the evil is burnt, but the beautiful and good always endure. The sacred fane of which you have laid the foundation will be watched and raised by other hands, when you are gone.’

‘Let us hope so,’ said Akbar, ‘but Salim, as yet, does not seem fitted for so high a destiny. All that he loves is pleasure.’

‘He is very young,’ pleaded Jodha Bai, ‘but he has a refined mind. Marriage may cure him of his wild whims, and change his whole life.’

‘Love has the power to do anything,’ assented Akbar, ‘and Mihar-ul-Nissa, like a good angel, may save him, and through him redeem this great country from tyranny and misrule.’

‘But you must find the way to have Salim married to Mihar-ul-Nissa,’ remarked Jodha Bai. ‘Salim is not yourself, and if we do not help him, he will not be able to overcome the obstacles which lie in his path.’

‘I see no obstacles,’ answered Akbar. ‘Does Mihar-ul-Nissa love another? In that case we can do nothing: but I am sure she cannot help loving Salim, he is as beautiful as she is herself, and they will make a splendid couple.’

‘She adores him,’ replied Jodha Bai. ‘She declared her love for Salim to me before her own mother, which no other girl could ever have ventured to do, and is not the shy creature you would imagine her to be. She enjoyed a happy tête-à-tête only to-day with Salim in the room next to my own; in fact they must have had, like us, many stolen interviews.’

‘Then what stands in the way of their happiness?’ inquired Akbar. ‘Surely Ghias Beg can have no objection?’

‘He has,’ said Jodha Bai. ‘Her mother was telling me that Mihar-ul-Nissa has already been

betrothed to Ali Kuli Beg, and so they cannot break off the engagement.'

'Then what do you propose to do?' asked Akbar. 'I am sure if Salim asked them they would gladly consent.'

'I doubt that,' said Jodha Bai, 'that is why I ask you to make them.'

'No, dear,' was Akbar's firm reply, 'I cannot *make* them do it: I cannot even try to persuade them, for even that will amount to a command, and I would not order anything or anybody. I, who am the founder of this law of justice, cannot have it transgressed, even in favour of my own son. I would rather suffer than exert any influence to pervert the law which I have laid down for all alike.

'It is most unfortunate, but I cannot give way to fondness for my own son, and try to influence Ali Kuli Beg or Mirza Ghias Beg to break off the engagement. God has given me a whole people to be my children, and the happiness of them all is as dear to me as that of Prince Salim. I do not wish to darken my reign with a single act of injustice or cruelty. I sit sometimes for hours listening to the history of the past ages of different nations, and I find how perversely great and good men are judged by posterity, their little mistakes are magnified into crimes, ignoring all the circumstances and exigences which compel even a thoroughly good man to do an untoward

act against his own will. I have often to do things against which my heart rebels, but which the well-being of the whole country demands, and yet there is something in human nature which misconstrues one's acts, which delights in seeing a man fail; and people dwell more on one's shortcomings than on the good and beautiful which may have formed part of the same life. It seems as if the mere sight of an unselfish person is objectionable to worldly people, and nothing pleases them more than to find that even he is not proof against temptation.

‘It is imperative for a man who wants to set an example to his people, and to prove to them their own divine nature above earth and its surroundings by his disinterested acts, to be deliberately good, kind, and honest, so that the vulgar may find nothing to justify their own selfish motives. Now my people look up to me as the shadow of God upon earth, and I must do all that I can to merit their confidence and respect.’

‘You are always right,’ said Jodha Bai, ‘but I cannot look with the same calmness on this question: all that I know is that the happiness of my son is at stake, and an order from you, a word from you, can assure it for ever.’

‘But I shall pass no such order,’ replied Akbar. ‘The Prince may try to persuade them and win them over, but if they will not listen to him I will do nothing.’

‘He may possibly succeed,’ said Jodha Bai, ‘if you only show that you approve of the idea; otherwise, I do not see any hope for him.’

‘As you know, I would like to do so very much, and I have no objection to saying so publicly,’ replied Akbar; ‘but beyond this I will not go.’

‘You may be persuaded to do a little more,’ said Jodha Bai coaxingly, ‘when you know more about the case; for, if the Prince fails to win her as his wife, I shudder to think of the consequences.’

‘I do not fear anything in that respect,’ said Akbar calmly. ‘Salim is so wayward, his love may be a mere fancy which may pass away in time, so do not trouble yourself about it. What pains me is to find the Prince associates with low people. The wellbeing of the whole nation depends on his character, and it ill becomes him to waste his youth when he ought to be preparing himself for the work which at no distant date must devolve upon him. However, I must try to reclaim my poor prodigal by severity as well as affection.’

‘Gentleness must assuredly be used,’ exclaimed Jodha Bai, with all the love of a Hindu mother, ‘before any other means are taken. He is such a gentle boy, and is sure to improve, while harsh means may drive him to an opposite course. And as you just said, people love to make up stories. I am sure all that is said about him cannot be true.’

‘It may be so,’ quietly observed Akbar, ‘but

I have always found some substratum of truth under the wildest stories.'

'His love for Mihar-ul-Nissa may, after all, be a real love,' suggested Jodha Bai, 'and not a passing whim. It may change his whole life, chasten and purify it, as all love does.'

'Salim seems to be incapable of real single-hearted devotion,' remarked Akbar. 'He is like a bulbul, ready to taste every new flower which attracts his fancy, and I doubt if even Mihar-ul-Nissa will be able to keep him captive for ever.'

'You may for once be wrong,' said Jodha Bai. 'Mihar-ul-Nissa will rule him as no woman has ever done before. I know her, and I believe she will be able to control him fully.'

'It may be so,' replied Akbar, a little tired, 'but let us leave this subject now. It puzzles me, and may keep us awake the whole night. I came to you to pass a few, happy, light hours, but even here things creep in to snatch away from me the little leisure which I could call my own; in fact, no king has any time of his own.'

'You are tired,' said Jodha Bai in deep concern. 'It was rather thoughtless of me to speak to you about this matter. I am so sorry. Forgive me.'

She rose and prepared with her own hands a sweet refreshing drink, and brought it to Akbar, who drank it with great gusto; and taking a sitar she struck a tune, and the very marble walls

seemed to pour out ravishing melody in response, filling the hall with exquisitely tender music ; and some beautiful odalisks got up to dance, the silver bells hanging on their ankles tinkling in time with the music which the lovely sitar gave forth, and then all the voices joined in chorus to sing the following song of love and spring :

‘The love-sick moon steals softly through the night
In search of love and its reflected light.
The cuckoo sings within the shady grove,
“My love, my love,” it cries,
“In converse with eternal love,
Pours out her soul in sighs.”

Upon the green the virgins meet,
In rosy chaplets gay,
With song and music how they greet,
Sweet Tijiya’s lovely day.
Up goes the swing on mango-tree,
Yon cloud with dimpled wings
Comes down in showers light and free,
Green grove with music rings.

Soft fingers strike the softest notes
And rouse the nodding grove,
The nestled birds upraise their throats,
To hail the rain they love.
The cool celestial breezes play,
The meadow, grove, and stream,
Attired in sweetness, there display
Fresh glory of a dream.’

The sweet vibrations of this exquisite melody, accompanied by the tinkling of a thousand silver

bells, rolled out in the lofty marble halls, and Akbar derived from it that repose which he longed to have. He felt a strange peace steal over his heart as he lay half asleep on his golden couch, listening to the music and dance around him.

Very soon he felt it time to retire, being late, and rising he gave the signal for the festival to end.

CHAPTER VII

WHEN Mihar-ul-Nissa left the room with her mother, it seemed to Salim as if the sun itself had disappeared. The sunbeams played to and fro on the marble floor and the brilliant walls, but they brought no rays of joy to his love-sick heart. In the interview with which he had just been blessed his heart, unconscious of obstacles which obstructed its way, was so full of rapture that even earth and heaven seemed too narrow to afford it a vent, but now it seemed to him as if all of a sudden he had been thrown from the brightest heaven to the darkest hell. He rose, but his limbs refused to carry him, and sinking back he remained lost in utter gloom for many hours. The evening had gathered over the gay palace, and lamps were twinkling like stars when he again rose and strode to his own apartments, his head sunk on his bosom, his arms folded within his robes, so unlike the laughing Prince who had entered the palace in the morning, that there was something startling in the contrast which his pallor and dejection presented to the thoughtless brows and animated air of the hitherto gay Prince Salim.

He quietly entered his private chambers where his gay companions were already waiting for him, and had transformed the fairy mansion into Elysium. Festoons of flowers hung from the beautifully sculptured cornices, while in the centre of the room bloomed rarest plants, placed in vases of white marble supported on delicately chiselled pedestals, and a magnificent chandelier rayed out light, which, caught in and reflected by the gems sparkling in the walls and pavements, glowed with the richest colour. The companions greeted their Prince gaily, but he sat moodily on a couch near which a table of solid gold sparkled with the wines of Shiraz. 'How, sir,' said a young man, seating himself near the Prince, 'is it that a cloud darkens your sunny brow?'

'It grieves my heart,' said another, 'to see your Highness in such gloom on the lovely Tija night.'

'Here are wine and music,' said Mirza Ibrahim Koka. 'May I fill up the cup which clears to-day of past regret and future fears?'

'If the juice of all the poppies and grapes were blended in one draught,' replied the Prince, 'it would lose its influence over me. There is a fire within my heart which all the Shiraz wines could not quench.'

'Your Highness is enigmatical,' said Ibrahim. 'Why torture us? Tell me that you desire the moon, and I will wrench it out of its blue skies, and place it at your feet.'

‘ You have divined it,’ said Prince Salim with some animation ; ‘ it is a moon-faced damsel that I desire, but she has not the coldness of the moon, and yet a black cloud hangs across my happiness.’

‘ Does she not love Your Highness ? ’ asked another. ‘ No, I cannot believe it.’

‘ She does,’ replied Prince Salim ; ‘ she loves me with all her heart, but——’

‘ There can be no obstacle,’ said Ibrahim ; ‘ command me, and you shall see her in this room to-night.’

‘ No,’ said Prince Salim, ‘ it is not a mere whim or passing fancy. I will have her all my life for my Queen, my Empress.’

‘ Are you really serious ? ’ said Ibrahim ; ‘ for if you wish to marry her, tell me who is her father, and I will at once speak to him and arrange the marriage.’

‘ Her father is Mirza Ghias Beg, who is in high favour with my father.’

‘ Ah, then Mihar-ul-Nissa has smitten you,’ said Ibrahim. ‘ I know her father, and have heard her sing. She is a thousand-tongued nightingale.’

‘ She sings so sweetly,’ said the enamoured Prince, ‘ and her songs are of her own composing. As for the sitar and the lyre I know not in which she outdoes the Peris. Her beauty is so dazzling that if I had a thousand tongues I could not

describe it. Poetry flows from her lips in a golden stream.'

'True,' said another companion, 'I hear on all sides that she is a veritable Houri. I am sure her father will be transported with joy when I tell him what his good fortune has effected, and he will thank his stars to have the future Emperor of this great country as his son-in-law.'

'I doubt it,' replied Prince Salim; 'her father has betrothed her to Ali Kuli Beg, and is said to be very firm. Unless they agree to dissolve the engagement, I am for ever doomed.'

'Why, His Majesty can make them do so,' said Ibrahim; 'they cannot stand against your wishes.'

'Will you be my messenger, sound them, and try to persuade them to annul the agreement?'

'That I will be only too pleased to do,' said Ibrahim. 'But look, the moon shines out, the night is advancing, the ruby sparkles in crystal urns, time is flying. Let us fill the cup in honour of Mihar-ul-Nissa the lovely, and fettered Prince Salim.'

'No, not fettered,' answered the Prince, 'but made fair and free. The love that fills my soul has raised me to heavens of which you cannot dream.'

Ibrahim in the meanwhile placed a jewelled cup in the hand of the Prince, who said as he drained

it, 'I cannot refuse it, as it is in honour of my beloved; even if you brought a poisoned cup and breathed her name over it, I would drink it as if it were nectar.'

'Fill up, fill up,' cried several voices. 'Cup-bearer, may your tavern last for a thousand years.'

As the cup went round the company grew lively. Prince Salim asked for another cup, and desired others to drink, and wine flowed freely. Ibrahim, who was the Prince's foster brother and Master of his Household, waved his hand, and from behind the purple draperies trooped out such forms as eyes seldom behold on this earth. They came, some with garlands, and others with lyres and sitars, jessamine flowers entwined in their jet black hair. In gliding measure they advanced and drew back, falling into a thousand ravishing positions. They knelt, filled the silver goblets, and gliding on in the dance, proffered bowls sparkling with wines. Drawing back for a moment, they filled the room with enchanting music and song. Quicker and quicker twinkled the silver bells on their feet, while songs came like streams of sound, bathing the senses, subduing with delight and transporting the mind to Elysian skies. They approached in groups, and as one group drew back, another advanced, filling the cup from the glowing table, and taking up the enchanting melody as they presented it, or with gay coquetry put it to

their own lips as these sweet words flowed from them :

‘Take these lotuses, loved one,
So sweet by the river they grew :
And the ripples seem’d whispering “Leave them,”
But I ruthlessly plucked them for you.

They were fresh as the morn when I found them,
But now they are casting their sheen :
They thought themselves peerless in beauty,
And they pine at discovering a queen.

Thou art queen of all virtues and beauty,
Yet my heart dares to call thee queen too,
And remember, when loving those lilies,
Thy subject who brought them to you.’

‘Beautiful,’ exclaimed Prince Salim, ‘I must send her some flowers to-morrow.’

‘Do not,’ said Ibrahim. ‘I must talk to her father and Ali Kuli Beg, and bring them round. Any mistake on our part may spoil the whole business. Ghias Beg’s a man of honour, and the mere idea that you are playing with his feelings may turn him against us.’

‘I will be guided by you,’ said Prince Salim. ‘But I am impatient to know the result of your visit to Mirza Ghias and Ali Kuli Beg.’

‘The first thing I shall do in the morning will be to go and see Mirza Ghias.’

‘But then it is getting late,’ said the Prince. ‘Let us retire so that you may be able to get up

early, and see Mirza Ghias Beg before he goes to attend the court.'

Accordingly, the Prince and his companions rose and retired to their own apartments, where Prince Salim dreamed of Mihar-ul-Nissa and her love.

It was rather late in the morning when Ibrahim got up. The morning rays poured down on his bed, when he opened his eyes and drank the delicious sherbet, cooled with snow, which his servant brought him; and then rising hastily he went through his toilet, and in a splendid chariot drove to the house of Mirza Ghias Beg.

Mirza Ghias received him with great courtesy, and invited him to sit on his pile of velvet cushions embroidered with gold, which looked like a bed of flowers on the snow-white floor: he turned the tube of the golden hookah towards him, offered him betels and cardamons, perfumes and sherbets, and then politely inquired:

'To what do I owe the honour of this visit?'

'My most beloved friend,' said Ibrahim, 'circumstances have placed me in a dilemma which I know not how to solve, and I have come to beg your assistance in its solution.'

'I am always at your service,' said Ghias Beg, 'and only happy to be of use to you.'

'Accept my hearty thanks for your kind wishes,' replied Ibrahim, 'but it is a delicate question,

and I hope you will pardon my presumption in speaking to you plainly.'

'I am all ears,' said Mirza Ghias, 'please enlighten me.'

'Prince Salim has sent me to you,' said Ibrahim, 'to ask you for the hand of your daughter, the beauteous Mihar-ul-Nissa.'

'I am flattered by the offer of the Prince,' said Mirza Ghias, reddening, 'but she has already been betrothed to Mirza Ali Kuli Beg, and I am sure the Prince, when you tell him about this, will give up the idea.'

'He already knows it,' said Ibrahim, 'but that makes him all the more anxious about it.'

'I do not think so,' said Mirza Ghias. 'It is a mere whim of the Prince, and I am sure he will forget it when you speak to him about my helplessness in this case.'

'Pardon me,' said Ibrahim, 'but I must speak plainly. The Prince has seen Mihar-ul-Nissa, and has fallen in love with her: he is in agonies, and has sent me to request you to annul the engagement, and to give her in marriage to him.'

'It pains me extremely to say that I cannot do anything,' said Mirza Ghias firmly. 'I have given my word of honour to Ali Kuli Beg, and cannot retract from it.'

'I would ask you to reconsider the matter,' said Ibrahim persuasively. 'You may take into consideration the fact that the happiness of the

future Emperor of India is in your hands. Permit me to point to the consequences which may be the result of your hasty action now.'

'I have thought of everything,' replied Ghias Beg. 'The Prince, as you know, is rather a gay person; he fancies now that he is in love, but it is a mere whim, a passing fancy, which may not last a day.'

'You are wrong for once,' said Ibrahim. 'I know my Prince better than you, and I can assure you that it is a fire of a lasting love which burns in his heart.'

'I am sorry,' said Mirza Ghias, 'but I would rather be a penniless beggar than barter my honour for my own personal aggrandizement. I have given my word to Ali Kuli Beg, and it rests with him, and him alone, to absolve me from my promise.'

'This is your last word?' inquired Ibrahim. 'Let me tell you that the Prince has power, and means to attain his wishes.'

'I do not doubt that,' said Mirza Ghias Beg, 'but I have to show my face to God, and I would rather die than have it blackened by dishonour and infamy. It shall never be said of Mirza Ghias Beg that he went back from his word for earthly honour and wealth. But you must speak to Ali Kuli Beg, and if he is willing to free me from my promise, I shall be only too happy to obey the commands of His Highness.'

‘ I will go and see Ali Kuli Beg at once,’ said Ibrahim, rising. ‘ The Prince must be impatiently waiting for me. I bid you good morning.’

‘ May God be with you,’ said Mirza Ghias Beg. ‘ I hope His Highness will permit my sincerest apologies to suffice.’

Ibrahim drove away without making a reply. He stopped at the gate of Ali Kuli Beg, who, on hearing of his arrival, came forward to receive him, and courteously conducted him to his simple reception room.

‘ The soldier’s house is honoured by your visit,’ said Ali Kuli Beg affably. ‘ How is His Highness, the Prince ? ’

‘ He is well,’ said Ibrahim, ‘ may heaven’s choicest blessings shower upon him. It is as his messenger that I have ventured to trouble you.’

‘ Can I be of use to His Highness ? ’ inquired Ali Kuli Beg ; ‘ if so, I am ready with my life to serve him.’

‘ You can do a great service,’ suggested Ibrahim, ‘ you can make him happy, or blast his happiness for all his life.’

‘ Will you be so kind as to explain ? ’ asked Ali Kuli Beg with some anxiety. ‘ My sword is always at his service.’

‘ It is not your sword that is wanted, though the Prince rightly esteems its power : it is an affair of the heart ! ’

‘ Will you explain your meaning ? ’ inquired Ali Kuli Beg.

‘ I am sorry, but it may give you pain, but I cannot help it : the Prince has fallen in love with Mihar-ul-Nissa, who has been betrothed to you, and has sent me to ask you to annul the engagement.’

‘ Silence, sir,’ said Ali Kuli Beg angrily, as his sword leaped out of its scabbard. ‘ I have sold my head, not my honour ; my body, not my soul. I cannot desert the maid who has been named my wife.’

‘ Listen to me, I pray you,’ said Ibrahim. ‘ If the girl herself does not love you, and wishes to have the Prince, you cannot marry a person who may hate you instead of loving you.’

‘ A word against the honour of my bride and you breathe no more. I tell you once for all that I cannot entertain such an idea.’

‘ But let me point out to you the mistake you are making in thus rejecting the overtures of the Prince,’ put in Ibrahim.

‘ But me no buts,’ interrupted Ali Kuli Beg, ‘ I know my own business, and thank you for your kind thoughts. I wish you good morning.’

‘ Good morning,’ said Ibrahim, rising to depart ; ‘ rash man, you will live to repent this day.’

Ali Kuli Beg made no reply, but bowed him out of the room, and it was with a heavy heart that Ibrahim turned to the mansion of the Prince.

‘ You have no good news,’ said Prince Salim as Ibrahim entered the room, ‘ your face shows the failure of your mission.’

‘ You have rightly divined, sir,’ murmured Ibrahim, sitting down. ‘ I have been baffled in my efforts, nay, insulted by the rude Persian.’

‘ I feared as much,’ said Prince Salim, falling back on his bed. ‘ Tell me what to do : my heart is tormented, it seems to have been set on fire, and I can do nothing.’

‘ Be of good cheer, my Prince,’ said Ibrahim affectionately. ‘ There are other charmers. Shake off the glamour which the pretty girl has placed round your heart.’

‘ I have tried to do so,’ said the Prince, ‘ I have tried to check my love for her. I have told my heart that there are as many charming girls ready to quench its fires, but it refuses all comfort. Mihar-ul-Nissa has become the queen of my heart, and she will rule it whatever may happen ; without her my life will be a void, a waste, my heart enshrouded in perpetual gloom.’

‘ Then,’ said Ibrahim, after some reflection, ‘ the best thing would be to write to His Majesty, telling him everything, and he may be able to give you the darling of your heart.’

‘ You are right,’ said the Prince. ‘ My father, if he wishes, can yet ensure my happiness, and by so doing make me what he wishes me to be. I will

write to him at once,' and taking up the pen he impulsively wrote the following note :

‘ My dear revered Father—the polar star of the two worlds—may you live for ever to protect me. I am scarcely able to hold my pen, and do forgive me, dear father, if you meet some improper expressions in my letter. I am sure you will make allowances for my waywardness when you know the present state of my mind.

‘ Father, you too have seen Mihar-ul-Nissa and marked her great accomplishments, which add lustre to her all-conquering beauty. Surely God Himself could not make one like her again. She has inspired me with a love I can no longer conceal. I love her with every throb of my heart, and my love (ah, the bliss) is reciprocated. Mihar-ul-Nissa loves me in return : my affections are too permanently fixed to be ever removed from my beloved, her image is engraven in my heart : so, dear and good father, do not try to dissuade me.

‘ My happiness or misery will be caused by the sort of orders you give : you can make two beings happy, or render their lives for ever miserable. I cannot live without her, and if you will not give your assent and a helping hand, you will make your beloved son miserable and wretched for ever. I am told that her father has betrothed her to Ali Kuli Beg, but you can annul the engagement, and

make two beings supremely happy.—I am, dear father, your ever loving son, SALIM.'

The Prince folded the letter, affixed his seal, and handing it over to a page, instructed him to deliver it into the hands of His Majesty.

CHAPTER VIII

ON the opposite side of the great enclosure of Fatehpur Sikri, there rises a strange structure which still shows in concrete form the lofty ideals which inspired the good and mighty Akbar.

Resting on a thick column rising some ten feet from the ground is a broad entablature surrounded by four galleries, for Hindus, Mahomedans, Christians and Zoroastrians, each communicating with the central platform by a causeway leading from the capital of the column to the four corners of the room.

It was here that the great inquirer would often take his seat on a carpet spread in the centre of this massive cobweb, as men of different creeds gathered in their respective galleries and opened discussion; he thus became the calm centre of a dialectic cyclone, as if above this earth and its petty mindedness, yet linked thereto by the love which coursed warmly through his veins.

It was here that the page sent by Prince Salim found Akbar seated on a black stone in front of the great gate, and looking into space, as Abul Fazal respectfully sat beside him.

‘I say, Ilami,’ said Akbar, ‘when is all this strife to cease, when is the warring of creeds and nations to stop, when will humanity see the heavenly light as it flows unsullied from above, and recognise its own place in the universe? Ah, when will superstition and fanaticism give place to reason, and open all hearts to the Divine light? Look how we have striven to convince even the learned of this country of the truths which shine like beacon lights on this earth. Yet they refuse to receive them or distort them according to their own narrow visions.

‘They call me an atheist, a heretic, a sunworshipper, a Christian, a Hindu, and a Buddhist, because I have declared there is truth in all with more or less error in all, that the common truth, which shines like the sun itself through many lined screens, illumines all religions. I act as a devout Hindu, a pious Christian, and a selfless Parsi, because I find no difference in the essence of their teachings. You, who can construct the future from the ruins of the past, tell me when things will change, when kings will cease to persecute people and priests to fight for their opinions. For, alas, kings rule not for the people, but for themselves, and priests work not for God but for their orders.

‘Look at the Mulvis and Pandits, how they fight, how they quarrel, how they waste their breath in useless hair-splitting, what good can

their words do when love is absent from their lives ? ’

‘ Ah,’ murmured Abul Fazal, ‘ if they would only inquire, if they would only follow the wide road of knowledge, undisturbed by narrow egotistic fancies, the scales would drop from their eyes and they would see the sun, and the age of reason would commence, pity would turn into boundless compassion, justice into universal brotherhood, and tolerance ripen into glowing love, and human life would become happy, peaceful, and loving.’

‘ You inspire me with hope, you paint the future in glowing colours,’ said Akbar, ‘ and yet I see nothing but darkness. You have often read to me the histories of old nations, and what do they show ? The words of a great teacher, a great prophet, seem no more than a flash of lightning in a cloud.’

‘ My beloved sovereign,’ said Abul Fazal, ‘ does not that flash show the path to many a weary traveller ? The words of past ages, to-day, as when they were spoken, vibrate on the air we breathe. Have they not touched your soul with life and truth ? What are a few years, a few centuries, a few ages ? The future is being woven in infinite time. Happy they who can imprison the flashing sunbeams of truth to lighten the gloom which surrounds human life.’

‘ My sage and philosopher,’ said Akbar, ‘ a kind

fate has sent you to help and guide me. My work is to act and strive to do right and leave the rest in the hands of the Divine Powers who guide and watch the child humanity. How beautifully Krishna has said, "Our task is to work without attachment and with steadfast devotion, without a desire for fruit of our actions." Yet they call me a heretic when I tell them this.'

'Egotism blinds them,' said Abul Fazal, 'it is the burden of the teachings of the Buddha, Christ, and Mahomed, and yet the blind Ulahs, the bigoted Brahmans, would not acknowledge the unity of the idea which finds expression in a different language.'

'What pains me most,' said Akbar, 'is that I find good and pious people, selfless and devoted, taking shelter in the darkness of ignorance.'

'They are like a man with weak eyes, who cannot see out into the sun without a green shade,' said Abul Fazal, 'they plead for forms, they think that the people need images and not abstract truth, but I am sorry for those who can see the light and yet are not sincere enough to declare what they know.'

'Forms, forms,' exclaimed Akbar, 'always forms, and alas, how many times have not the life-giving teachings crystallised into stone and iron. I would leave the forms untouched if they could convince me that forms operate for practical good in the lives of men. I cannot allow these dark

shadows to obstruct the light which flows from the Divine fountain. Let us proclaim the Truth, and rely on the power of Truth to find its way home to the hearts of the people. Truth requires no coloured shadows to heighten its dazzling effulgence.'

'It is God who speaks in you,' said Abul Fazal. 'It is a mistake to bring down the higher ideal to a lower level. Truth can draw people to its own heights, but once dragged down to a lower level, it loses its purity and its power for good.'

'The history of Hinduism makes it plain enough,' said Akbar. 'Purushottama, hanging between heaven and earth on his charpoy (bed) near my balcony, has propounded to me the high truths of the Vedas and Upanishads, bright like the noonday sun, and yet he, the teacher of Vedanta, would not see my face or come to my room because I happen to be born a Mahomedan, and in a manner *that* explains the failure of Vedanta. What could be more inconsistent than this? I have marvelled why teachings so pure in their nature have ceased to be operative. Why have the divine teachings of Buddha vanished from the land? My heart gives me a twofold answer—the unreadiness of humanity in general for those glorious teachings, and the eagerness of some great and good men to help it by other ways than direct truth. It was in the hope of leading people by gradual steps, as in a school, that forms were

created, but alas, the truths which these forms represented could not enshrine stone idols, they could only bear fruit in human hearts, and therefore, idols, instead of helping, stand like dark shadows to delude mankind.'

'Truly so,' said Abul Fazal, 'even great Shankara, who worked out a twofold system, esoteric and exoteric, failed in his aims, and the esoteric has been overshadowed by the exoteric which ends in a thousand lifeless and meaningless ceremonies.'

'We are wiser now,' said Akbar, 'and our Din Ilahi (divine religion) may yet unite humanity and lead it to its highest goal.'

'Amen,' said Abul Fazal, 'nothing is lost, and all our efforts must bear their fruits.'

Further conversation was interrupted as the page sent by Salim respectfully stepped up and placed the letter in the hands of Abul Fazal, who placed it before His Majesty. The Emperor tore it open, looked at it, and motioned the page to depart. When they were alone Akbar handed the letter to Abul Fazal, who read it aloud.

'Now Abul Fazal,' said Akbar, 'the Empress told me all about it last night. I have seen Mihar-ul-Nissa and have never seen a mortal face more exquisitely beautiful, a certain melancholy softens and elevates its expression, and gives to her beauty the charm of a spirit. I have heard her sing songs of her own composition, and she has a genius

beyond that of woman, keen, dazzling and bold, and if the Prince is really in love with her she may yet turn his heart to higher and purer aims. I do not know what Mirza Ghias Beg may say, I cannot compel him to do anything, though it will please me greatly if he can see his way to give Mihar-ul-Nissa in marriage to my son. She would make a splendid queen.'

'My gracious Sovereign,' said Abul Fazal, 'the affair requires delicate handling, and your Majesty might ask Mirza Ghias. If he is unwilling to go back from his word then we must bear patiently with the Prince and allow him to exhaust his idle humour.'

'The Prince seems to be deeply in love with her,' said Akbar, 'and in case Mirza Ghias persists in refusing the hand of his daughter he may do something rash.'

'Pardon me, my good Sovereign,' said Abul Fazal, 'but the Prince is so wayward in his habits that he will forget all about his love for Mihar-ul-Nissa as soon as some new whim attracts his fancy.'

'The Prince is in the heyday of youth,' mildly suggested Akbar, 'and is trying to stifle his higher desires in the muddy waters of dissipation. He will soon tire of it, and then no one will be better pleased with his pupil than his learned master, your brother. The lessons which he has imparted to him, the ideas which he has awakened, must

bear fruit. You yourself have told me that the Prince wants neither shrewdness nor capacity for affairs.'

'I will pawn my life that he does not,' said Abul Fazal. 'He lacks neither intelligence nor spirit. All that he needs is a desire for work.'

'He will have that in time,' said Akbar, 'and his love for Mihar-ul-Nissa may even now rouse his mind to work.'

'Ah, here come Mirza Ghias and Ali Kuli Beg, so the matter can be at once decided,' said Abul Fazal.

'I think you had better speak to Mirza Ghias. It will not do for me to open the subject,' suggested Akbar.

'As it pleases your Majesty,' said Abul Fazal, with a bow. 'I will put the question clearly to him.'

Mirza Ghias and Ali Kuli Beg respectfully laid their hands on their foreheads and touched the earth, and then rising stood near their Sovereign.

'You are early like ourselves,' said the Emperor, 'but that will give us a chance of a little chat with you. What brings the gallant Ali Kuli Beg to listen to the dry discussion of scholars?'

'To bask in the sunshine of your divine presence,' said Ali Kuli Beg, making a low obeisance. 'Discussion in a meeting which your Majesty illuminates by your presence cannot be dry.'

'So even you are picking up courtly manners,'

remarked Akbar. 'You are welcome to our discussions. Fools call these meetings dry and valueless, but know, young man, that ideas rule the universe for good or evil, and the greatest work is that which is done on the plane of thought. Man is called the greatest of all creation simply because he has the power to think, which enables him to move heaven and earth, and make creatures a thousand times stronger than himself obey his will and be of service to him.'

'A miracle,' exclaimed Mirza Ghias. 'How beautifully you have explained the power of thought, and yet our thoughts are mere fancies coming in and passing out like the wind that blows, little regarded by the men who may use them.'

'Exactly so, and according to the Yoga theory, it is said that if thought could be controlled, concentrated, and brought to a focal point, it could move the very heavens if so desired.'

'With your leave, sire,' said Ghias Beg, 'I cannot believe in such a thing. The Hindus seem to me to be mere speculative visionaries, who talk a great deal and weave out many philosophies which, practically, do not make them any better.'

'You mean the Hindus of the present day,' said Abul Fazal, 'but they are not authors of the lofty philosophical systems which are unsurpassed for their transcendental thoughts. The Hindus of ancient times were different from the narrow

sectaries of our own day, who float on the fathomless seas of the glorious thoughts of their ancestors like rudderless atoms. Enough of this,' added Abul Fazal with a gesture, 'we can talk of these things when the discussion opens, but I wish to speak to you about something which concerns you more than anything else.'

'Pray speak,' said Mirza Ghias.

'You will pardon my plain speaking,' said Abul Fazal, 'but I think I must make a clean breast of it all. Permit me to tell you that Prince Salim happened to see your charming daughter accidentally and lost his heart.'

'Go on,' said Mirza Ghias moodily.

'I think I have nothing more than this to say,' replied Abul Fazal, 'except that you can make Prince Salim intensely happy or extremely miserable. His Majesty is, as you know, unwilling to force his own wishes, but it will please His Majesty none the less if you approve of the proposal. His Majesty does not wish you to do anything which is very distasteful to you, so you are free to decide according to the dictates of your own conscience and reason.'

Mirza Ghias bowed and said, 'May the heavenly radiance of His Majesty's just rule extend from pole to pole. I can sacrifice my life in His Majesty's service but not my honour. I am flattered, nay honoured, by the proposal just made, but alas, I am powerless. Ali Kuli Beg has my

word and I cannot violate my promise. The word once spoken cannot be recalled, but if Mirza Ali Kuli Beg sets me free from my promise, I would think it a great honour to give my daughter in marriage to our good Prince Salim. May he live the life of a Khizer.'

'As for myself,' said Ali Kuli Beg solemnly, 'I would sooner die than see my betrothed married to another.'

'So you are firm,' said Akbar. 'I would it had been otherwise: however, let the marriage take place at an early date.'

'We came here before the usual opening time,' said Mirza Ghias, 'simply to request your Majesty to help us, for the Prince may create obstacles, which, without your help it will not be possible to surmount.'

'The Prince will do nothing,' said Akbar. 'You may retire now and make preparations for the marriage.'

'May the sun of your glory never set,' said Mirza Ghias and Ali Kuli Beg in one voice, as they salaamed and retired to the Diwan'iam.

'Now, Abul Fazal,' said Akbar, 'I feared as much. They have acted as honourable men must, but I hoped that they would decide otherwise.'

'I wish they had,' said Abul Fazal, 'but Mirza Ghias is an honourable man, while Ali Kuli Beg is a rash soldier.'

‘ But now tell me how to deal with the Prince : I do not want to occasion him unnecessary pain, but yet I do not see how to avoid it.’

‘ The best course would be for the Prince to absent himself from Agra for some months and to travel a little. The Rana of Odeypore is again in rebellion, and the Prince may well take that expedition in hand. In the excitement of war he will forget all about Mihar-ul-Nissa ; in fact he will have no time to think of any such thing, and by the time the war is over his passion will be exhausted, and on his return, when he finds her married, he will forget all about her.’

‘ Your advice is good,’ said Akbar, ‘ but if the Prince is really in love, the marriage of Mihar-ul-Nissa in his absence may madden him, and estrange his affections from us. However, this seems the best course and you had better write to the Prince on my behalf and direct him to proceed with the expedition.’

Abul Fazal took his pen and ink and wrote as follows :

‘ Light of my eyes, comfort of my heart, dearer than life, my son Prince Salim, ringlet on the forehead of fortune and collyrium of the eye of greatness, may long life be yours.

‘ Your loving letter was on a subject which much surprised me, as I thought you were quite happy with the beautiful Princess your wife. As you know I would have been only too glad to promote

your happiness, but as you tell me Mihar-ul-Nissa is betrothed to another, I will ask you to relax this determination. She cannot be yours unless her parents annul her engagement. I could compel them to do so, but it would not be consistent with my policy, and I am sure you do not wish to see my rule tarnished with a single act of injustice in my old age. I will do all I can to carry out your wishes, but alas, even for you I cannot depart from the path of justice.

‘And now I have another matter on which to speak to you. The Rana of Odeypore has broken into rebellion, and devastated our country. The situation is serious and requires strong and immediate measures. At present I am unable to take command of the forces in person, so I ask you to march with the army and quell the rebellion. Three army corps set out to-day. You, however, can join them, by forced marches, a day or two later, but it will not do to tarry long. As has been said, you can stop the growth of a young tree by the tip of your finger, but when once it has grown, even an elephant cannot uproot it. So let your action be prompt and determined, and let all know of what the future Emperor of India is made.

‘May victory attend you. With my blessings to protect you from harm,—Believe me, your loving father,

AKBAR.’

Abul Fazal read this letter to his Majesty, who signed it, then carefully reading it himself, handed it to the page who had brought the letter from the Prince, and told him to deliver it.

CHAPTER IX

WHEN the Prince received his father's letter he read and re-read it several times. Choked with emotion he gazed vacantly into space as if trying to conjure up the future, as unheeded tears flowed down his cheeks. All the hopes he had formed, all the prospects he had pictured, all the love that burned like a living flame in his heart, whirled confusedly through his thoughts. He could see that his father wanted him out of the way. The orders were peremptory and he knew he must obey. He felt like a caged lion, helpless with all his strength. One moment he was in despair, the next inspired with hope. 'If Mihar-ul-Nissa loves me,' he said, 'they cannot force her to marry another, and I must see her at all hazards before I depart. I will place my life in her hands, and if she also decides to banish me to eternal tortures then good-bye to this life, but if she promises to be faithful, if she promises to be firm, then all the power of heaven and earth cannot separate her from me.'

Such were his thoughts as he tried to calm his mind by holding out illusory hopes which failed

to soothe his inflamed heart. He tried to cheat himself into the belief that if he succeeded in quelling the rebellion and establishing order, his father would alter his mind and force Ghias Beg to give his daughter in marriage to him.

As he sat lost in thought a familiar voice said, 'My child, why are you so thoughtful? What troubles you so that you are crying? Open your heart to your old mother, for she would pluck the very stars from heaven for her dear child.'

'Dear, kind nurse,' said the Prince, as a new thought flashed through his mind, 'who but you merits my confidence and can help me in my trouble, you who fondled me in my babyhood and sang me to sleep in my childhood?'

'You are the apple of my eye,' said the old woman fondly, 'tell me what vexes you, for it pains me to see you in such a mood.'

'Promise me that you will keep it secret, old mother,' said the Prince, 'and help me for good or evil.'

'Shall I betray my own child?' replied the old nurse. 'You have my promise. Tell me what ruffles your gay spirit and I will bring you your heart's desire.'

'Thank you, mother,' said the Prince. 'Mihar-ul-Nissa has bewitched me, captivated me, and she is betrothed to another. My father wishes to send me away, so that she may be married in

my absence. Before I go I want to have one last look, one last word with her, so that I may know my fate from her own lips.'

'How can you do so without the consent of the girl?' said the old woman. 'I wish you had told me before, then even the betrothal would not have taken place. Does she love you? Have you spoken to her? If so I may perhaps be able to arrange an interview.'

'I have both seen and spoken to her,' said the Prince, 'and heard from her sweet lips that she is not indifferent to me and my love. All I wish you to do is to take a note from me to her and bring me her reply.'

'That is easily done,' said the old nurse. 'Give me the letter and I will come back with a reply in the twinkling of an eye.'

'You are so good, mother,' said the Prince Salim, as he composed himself to write the following letter :

'My own beloved, my ever dear one, loved more fondly now, because loved despairingly, dearer than life, my father orders me to go to Odeypore and has refused to do anything in the matter. I must obey, but I dream of persuading him to act differently if I return victorious and with a big army at my command, but if they act otherwise in my absence, by all the happiness I have known at thy side, by all the rapture of which I have dreamed by that delicious hour which first gave thee to my

gaze, by the first confession of love, I swear that I will shake the very throne of my father to its foundation. Now, I beg, adored one, that you will meet me once before I depart, to allow me to say adieu to you with my own lips. Deign to see me and listen to me but once, that I may go out with new hopes and a firmer faith. Thou art gentle to the whole creation, wilt thou not be merciful to thy lover? For even if he were of the humblest mould, the fragrance of the rose has penetrated him, to embalm, to sanctify, to inspire. My heart has fed upon thy love and owes to thee the germ of the treasures that now it proffers. I await the reply and will bless the moment when I see you again. Farewell, this letter touches thy hand, these characters meet thine eyes. Shall they be more blessed than he who is their author? Once more farewell.'

The Prince arose, and folding the letter handed it to the nurse, and requested her to deliver it as soon as possible into the hands of Mihar-ul-Nissa. The nurse with the easy assurance of one who knows her business, promised to bring an answer in an hour's time. Nor was the old lady slow in her action, for she at once ordered a palanquin, and started for the house of Mirza Ghias. In less than ten minutes she was in the seraglio of the Mirza, affably talking to the Begum and her lovely daughter.

'So,' said the old nurse, 'you have decided to

marry your charming Mihar-ul-Nissa to Ali Kuli Beg, and never told me a word about it ? ’

‘ It was not I who decided,’ said Begum Ghias, ‘ but my husband, who did not speak about it to me. So you cannot blame me for not consulting you, for who could have advised better in this matter than you, wise old mother ? ’

‘ I thought I could,’ said the nurse, ‘ but what is the good, you have let your husband decide the whole matter. What can a mere man know about a woman, her thoughts, her hopes, her ideals.’

‘ True, mother,’ said Begum Ghias, ‘ but God has placed us under their guidance, and for good or evil we have to abide by their decision.’

‘ Nay,’ replied the old woman, ‘ but we need not give up our empire. Really, dear sister, you are too gentle and obedient, for what has a husband to do with match making ? It is our domain, but even here you have submitted.’

‘ Have I ? ’ said the Begum. ‘ But I thought it was all for the well-being of our child.’

‘ Was it for the well-being of the child that your husband wished to abandon her on the road ? ’ inquired the old woman sarcastically, ‘ she would have perished there and then but for your love for her. Men have always some selfish motive which they cover up by a fair outer show. My child, you know nothing of the world.’

‘ Mother, you are wise,’ said the Begum, ‘ tell

me what I am to do to safeguard the happiness of my child ? ’

‘ You are right in consulting me,’ said the old woman, as her eyes twinkled. ‘ The best course would be for you to wait and watch, and see if Ali Kuli Beg is a person that would suit your lovely daughter.’

‘ Thanks, thanks,’ said the Begum, ‘ I am very glad you came, I will see the boy and judge for myself.’

‘ I need no thanks,’ murmured the old woman, ‘ but a man’s face reveals nothing. Wait for six months and then you will be able to have a true opinion of his worth,’ and then turning to Mihar-ul-Nissa, said, ‘ Child, you have not shown me your new embroideries, your new flowers, and scents : you think I have grown too old for such things.’

‘ No, mother,’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa, ‘ I will go and fetch my work-basket.’

‘ No, child,’ said the old nurse, ‘ I will go with you and see your room and the beauties your delicate fingers have worked in it.’

‘ Come, mother,’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa, ‘ I shall be happy to show you my pretty things.’

The old nurse rose, Begum Ghias wanted to accompany her, but she insisted on going alone with Mihar-ul-Nissa, and on entering the chamber which the girl had adorned according to her own taste, and which looked like an exquisite bower of flowers, the old nurse admired the room and

paid compliments to Mihar-ul-Nissa's taste, then she quietly slipped the note into her hand.

'What, mother,' said the girl surprised and turning pale, 'what does this mean?'

'Hush, child,' said the old nurse; 'read it.' Then turning aside she began to admire the delicate embroidered silk curtains which fell in pretty folds round the door.

Mihar-ul-Nissa, as she read the letter, turned pale then crimson, and large tears dropped from her eyes. She kissed the note, placed it near her heart, and acting on the impulse of the moment, wrote :

'Dearest, come to me this evening and meet me in the garden, where you will find me after sunset. Farewell till then.' She then folded it up and handed it to the nurse.

'Have you anything else to say?' asked the old woman looking up.

'No, dear mother, no,' replied Mihar-ul-Nissa.

'And will he thank the messenger who gives thy letter?'

Mihar-ul-Nissa blushed from brow to neck and remained silent.

'I see,' said the old woman, 'you have decided to meet him, you have done well.' Leaving the room, she sat for some time with Begum Ghias, talking to her as usual, and then bidding them adieu, went straight to the chamber of the Prince, who was anxiously waiting for her.

‘ Oh, dearest mother,’ said the Prince, as he read the letter, ‘ how shall I thank you ? ’

‘ I am rewarded by the joy I have given you,’ said the nurse.

The enamoured Prince made the old woman recite to him over and over again every syllable of the brief conversation that had taken place between herself, Mi-har-ul-Nissa, and her mother; a thousand times he questioned her about the looks and countenance of his beloved, and bade her recommence the recital which he had thus interrupted, allowing the nurse to go only when several of his gay companions broke in upon him.

They rallied him upon his seclusion the whole day, and invited him to come out to the garden and celebrate as usual the feast of the New Moon. But he refused to move, and pretending that he had an engagement in the seraglio, he retired into the zenana, and, wrapping himself in a cloak, slipped out into the street, and rapidly made his way to the home of his beloved.

The shadows of evening had just darkened when the Prince found himself beneath the garden wall, but here he began to realise some of the difficulties of the situation: the wall which surrounded the garden was some ten feet in height, and the door opening on the street was locked from inside.

After going some distance round the wall looking for some means of ascent, his search was rewarded as he found the roots of a large banyan tree

jutting out from the wall, forming easy steps to its very top. Taking hold of a long root he slowly climbed up one side of the wall and then quietly slid down into the garden itself.

Mihar-ul-Nissa, when the old nurse left her, sank into a deep but delicious reverie. Drawing forth the letter from her loose silk blouse she devoured every word and kissed every line, then suddenly she felt a chill creep over her heart as she thought of her betrothal; and her torments were in proportion to the happiness of which she had been dreaming.

Very slowly the day dragged itself out, though it seemed to her that night would never come, but at last, with her heart throbbing in anticipation of the meeting, she realised that the time had come for her to act.

Her first impulse was to open the back door and slip into the garden, but she hesitated for the danger of discovery seemed so great, and she now realised how great was the risk to which her reply had exposed the Prince and herself. For a time prudence and passion warred within her, but at last the latter conquered, and timidly opening the door she slipped into the garden. Being the first evening of new moon the darkness was unrelieved, but her love instinctively guided her to the spot where Prince Salim was hiding. A moment more and she was in his arms, her heart beating violently, and she almost fainted in the

excess of her emotions, but all her fears seemed to vanish as she felt his strong embrace and heard his voice whispering soft loving words.

‘How good, how generous of you to come,’ murmured Prince Salim. ‘Oh ! the bliss of holding you again near my heart, before I depart to face new dangers, new perplexities.’

At first Mihar-ul-Nissa made no reply. Their feelings held both for a moment silent. But oh, that moment. What centuries of bliss were crowded into it. At last, gently releasing herself, Mihar-ul-Nissa said : ‘Oh my lord, oh my own dear Salim, why should you go and leave me here alone at the mercy of my enemies ? You promised to speak to the Emperor, would he then do nothing ? or did you forget all about it ? I am afraid you do but play with me.’

‘My own, my sweet Mihar-ul-Nissa,’ protested Salim, ‘I wrote to my father, asking him to break the engagement, and the result is that I have been ordered to leave the city. My happiness, my life rests solely in your hands. Let us go together and in some happier land I will hew out a kingdom where we can pass our lives in uninterrupted bliss.’

‘That I cannot do. Think of the shame, the disgrace, and the grief of my parents to find me so undutiful.’

‘I can see no other way. The Emperor says he cannot order the engagement to be broken off.

Your father is averse to our love, my father talks only of justice. With these two as enemies what can we do but run away together and marry in spite of them ? ’

‘ Justice indeed,’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa. ‘ What appears justice to His Majesty may be a cruel piece of injustice. We love each other and were meant by God to love each other, but His Majesty thinks it justice to doom us to eternal unhappiness. What right has any one to dispose of me as if I were a soulless doll, when God has endowed me with a free and independent heart ? ’

‘ True,’ said Prince Salim, ‘ but it is the cruel custom of the country that women have no voice, and are said to be incapable of judgment, and merely guided by whims.’

‘ Whims,’ laughed Mihar-ul-Nissa bitterly. ‘ It is our hearts which guide us, and I would rather trust a person with heart and feelings, than one with intellect only. I wish I could appeal to His Majesty.’

‘ I wish you would,’ said the Prince, ‘ for who could resist the pleadings of your lovely lips ? When I am gone you will have to fight alone against them all. No, I cannot leave you unprotected, I must refuse to leave this city.’

‘ That would not be wise,’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa. ‘ Our enemies would set His Majesty against us, and a thousand tongues would be ready to misrepresent your refusal, while should you return

victorious and convince His Majesty of the justice of our cause, we may yet be united under his blessings.'

'I will do just as you please,' said Salim. 'I am sure they cannot force you to marry against your wishes during my absence. You may tell them from me that if they do, they will not be allowed to carry it through.'

'I will do all that I can,' said Mihar-ul-Nissa, 'and now,' she added, trembling with emotion, 'I must go, lest somebody should see me here.'

'Art thou so eager to leave me?' said Salim. 'Alas! when thou hast departed it will seem as if the moon itself had left the skies. Ah, speak to me again. Of what music hast the envious silence deprived my soul? Thou wilt not forget me?'

'Forget you,' said Mihar-ul-Nissa. 'Have I not told you a hundred times of my love? But of that, sweet lord, thou shalt judge hereafter.'

'Ah,' murmured the Prince, 'it seems to me all a dream—a vision too ethereal for this earth, a vision too heavenly to last. Mihar-ul-Nissa will you never forget?'

'Why speak thus?' said Mihar-ul-Nissa, 'this heavenly radiance of love which has entered my heart can die only when this heart lies cold and still.'

'What can separate two hearts so united?' exclaimed Prince Salim; 'even the effusive rhetoric of Abul Fazal cannot prove such a love wrong.'

‘Wrong? No,’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa, ‘only an act of tyranny could part two hearts so closely united. It is no doubt justice to allow parents to do as they please with their children, for justice presumes them to be actuated by the highest motives for the well-being of their offspring, but when their actions are anything but just, and mean the ruin of a human life, surely the law must stand aside, and the state should see that no injustice is done.’

‘You would make a clever legislator,’ said Prince Salim, ‘and even outmatch Abul Fazal in his own domain. I do not know why, but he seems prejudiced against me. His smooth tongue has won the confidence of my father, and has grown so arrogant that I think that I shall have to shake him out of his pride one of these days.’

‘Abul Fazal is a good and learned man,’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa, ‘he has done more in building and uniting this great empire than any one else, and you must overlook his shortcomings. He is an austere man and cannot like your gay and careless habits.’

‘But have I not renounced them since I met you?’ said Salim, ‘am I not trying to be good? Of course I cannot yet talk as a Moulvi, but will learn if you wish.’

‘You are rather hard on Abul Fazal,’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa, ‘I wonder what has made him merit your displeasure.’

‘He is too outspoken,’ said Salim, ‘and does not know how to hold his tongue, deeming himself secure in the favour of the Emperor.’

‘I think we had better separate now,’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa, ‘it is nearly time for dinner and they will be looking for me.’

Thus saying she drew near him, her face no longer averted from his lips nor her form from his parting embrace.

‘It is not late, you have given me but half-an-hour,’ murmured the Prince.

‘Half an hour,’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa, ‘nay, I have given you my whole life.’

‘Go, then, light of my soul,’ sighed the Prince, ‘God knows when we shall meet again.’

‘Soon,’ exclaimed Mihar-ul-Nissa, ‘and for ever, for we shall never part again.’

‘Be it so,’ said Salim proudly, ‘when next we meet, it will not be by stealth, but as man and wife, or it will be at the head of an army thou shalt see me come to thy rescue. One more kiss and now farewell.’

Mihar-ul-Nissa disappeared down a path and Prince Salim slowly slipped out by the way he had come.

CHAPTER X

It was a gloomy morning, clouds were hanging low overhead, while not a breath of air relieved the oppressive closeness of the atmosphere, when Prince Salim, with a heavy heart, left Agra for the hills of Kummelmeer. Mihar-ul-Nissa had risen early, and from the top of her house saw the Prince ride forth with his companions, and when the cavalcade disappeared from her eyes, she sank to the ground like a lotus from which the light of the sun had been withdrawn. Wrapped in her own thoughts, absorbed in her own fancies, forgetful of all that was passing round her, she did not notice the approach of her mother who had come up also.

‘What absorbs your mind so much?’ inquired her mother, patting her on the shoulder. ‘Will you not tell me—your own mother—the day dream in which you are indulging?’

‘Mother,’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa quite startled, ‘I did not see you coming up—I was lost in reverie.’

‘In reverie, child,’ remarked the Begum, ‘it is so very unlike you. You who could not remain

still for a moment, seem now to have changed entirely, and sit about listlessly for hours. Will you not tell me what preys on your mind ? ’

‘ Nothing in particular, mother,’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa, ‘ it is very hot downstairs, so I came up for a breath of fresh air. I was feeling depressed, but even here I find no relief, not a leaf stirs. It is as bad here as inside the room.’

‘ My dear child, you cannot deceive me,’ said Begum Ghias, looking with loving anxiety at her daughter, ‘ there is something that troubles your mind, engrosses your fancies, and disturbs your sleep.’

‘ There is nothing the matter with me,’ replied Mihar-ul-Nissa, ‘ it is the heat, the weather, which unnerves me. When the rains break I shall be all right.’

‘ My daughter,’ said the Begum, ‘ I am not so foolish as you seem to think. I have lived long enough in this world to know something of human nature, and your face shows me what is passing in your mind. Since your betrothal you have not been like your old self. It is not “ nothing ” that has changed my gay sprightly child, whose fingers knew no rest, to a sad and listless girl spending her time in useless reverie.’

‘ Mother, what can you know ? ’ replied Mihar-ul-Nissa. ‘ Mind is deeper than the ocean, who can fathom its strange depths, and what does it matter to you if I am unhappy ? ’

‘One can know from its ripples what ruffles its depths,’ said Begum Ghias. ‘I know your thoughts as well as my own. However, your marriage takes place in a month, on this day of next moon, so cheer up and be happy.’

‘Marriage,’ exclaimed Mihar-ul-Nissa, rising as if a galvanic shock had passed through her form and burnt up all her self-control. ‘Am I to be thrown away thus, rejected like rubbish? Do not talk to me of marriage, I pray you.’

‘There,’ said Begum Ghias, ‘have I not your secret? You do not wish to marry Ali Kuli Beg, because golden fancies have taken possession of you. My child, I thought you wise, but you are as foolish as any other young, giddy girl. Here is a man, good, noble, and handsome, who will adore you all his life, but you spurn him, and wish to throw yourself into the arms of a libertine, who has filled your ears with flattering nothings, and will cast you aside like a toy when you cease to please him.’

‘Mother, you know all,’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa in a supplicating tone, ‘you know that I love Prince Salim. I love him and it is enough, I ask for no return. All I ask for, all I want you to do, is to leave me as I am. For God’s sake do not cast me away from you! I shall be quite happy to live with you always and wait for the Prince. I can assure you that he loves me with all the intensity of his heart.’

‘A truce to your wild fancies,’ replied the Begum. ‘It is a passing whim of the Prince and his honeyed words have taken possession of you. I can assure you, he means absolutely nothing.’

‘Mother,’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa, ‘have you never loved? What if he casts me aside? What if he spurns me? I have given my heart to him. How can I ever tell you of the joy, the bliss, which my self-surrender has brought me?’

‘Love!’ replied Begum Ghias. ‘I love my husband. What you call love is some blind inhuman passion which can find no place in a sane mind.’

‘It is in that, that its power, its sweetness, its bliss lies,’ murmured Mihar-ul-Nissa. ‘Under its pure and bright light, the shadow of self ceases to exist, the ego merges into the life of the beloved and finds the true, limitless joy of life. You may talk to me of the pains and tortures of selfish love, but you know not the pure selfless love that transmutes the so-called pains into bliss and turns the bed of thorns into a bed of roses. Mother, dear mother, love cannot be defined, it is above this earth; by trying to describe it human language only dwarfs its greatness; it must be known and felt. The fire of love burns away all the veils which hide the beloved, and unites its devotee to the heart’s desire. You talk of marrying me to another, and yet all the powers on earth cannot separate my heart from him.’

‘Foolish girl,’ said the Begum firmly, ‘Hafiz seems to have turned your head. I was told not to allow you to read the book, for it is said that one who reads Hafiz a hundred times becomes mad, but I was foolish enough to permit you to read it and now I must suffer. It is not for maidens to prate like this of love.’

‘Hafiz, mother dear,’ pleaded Mihar-ul-Nissa, ‘probes one’s heart, and gives expression to one’s innermost fancies, aspirations, and emotions, which but for him would remain undefined. He weaves them out in sweet melodies. Therefore they call him revealer of secrets and the tongue of the invisible.’

‘Tush ! child,’ said her mother, ‘he always talks of wine and women, pleasure and pastime, and I am sure he is not fit for the young to read.’

‘Hafiz ? Dear mother, say not a word against him. When his songs seem lightest they are of the deepest meaning. Hafiz dwells on the pleasures of youth and enjoyment of the world merely to draw the imagination to the source from which all that is beautiful borrows its beauty. He looks on rose, zephyr, nightingale, and beloved alike, as nought but mirrors reflecting each an infinitesimally small fraction of love’s glory.’

‘It may be so,’ acceded the Begum, ‘but the higher side of his teachings is ignored by most people, and his verses are quoted as a sanction for dissipation.’

‘The sun shines equally on all,’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa, ‘but its rays take colour from the medium they pass through. It is not the fault of Hafiz that evil-hearted people distort his delicate and noble sentiments according to their own imperfect understanding.’

‘For instance,’ said Begum Ghias smiling, ‘it has made you exalt your wild fancies and has turned your head, so that you have thrown modesty to the winds and speak of your love to your own mother.’

‘You, dear mother, wished me to speak to you,’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa with some warmth, ‘and now that we are on the subject I think I had better make a clean breast of it all. Mother, I must tell you that I have promised myself to Prince Salim, and I am his and his alone. Mother, I look to you for help, for comfort. Will you not save me now?’ She waited for a reply, but as her mother only frowned, she fell on her knees, and holding up her hands in supplication, said in a voice full of entreaty, as tears rolled down her cheeks, ‘For God’s sake do not forsake me now, mother, I am so very, very miserable. Do not increase my misery by proposing my marriage to one whom I do not love. I implore you to save me from this crowning wretchedness.’

‘You are a wilful child,’ said the Begum melting a little, ‘but you really do not know the happiness we have arranged for you.’

‘Mother, I beseech you,’ cried Mihar-ul-Nissa, ‘do not be so cruel; you cannot make me happy by thrusting me away from you. I shall die if you send me away from this house.’

‘Dear child, do not be so silly,’ said her mother. ‘I will speak to your father and see what can be done.’

‘Thanks, thanks, dear mother,’ replied Mihar-ul-Nissa, ‘I knew a mother’s heart could not be hard.’

‘And mine,’ said Mirza Ghias stepping out, ‘you think is made of adamant. I have unintentionally heard what has passed between you two. Not being able to find you inside, I came up to join you and thus heard part of what Mihar-ul-Nissa has been saying. Will she not repeat to her father what she has been saying to her mother?’

‘Father,’ said the girl firmly, ‘I cannot be the wife of Ali Kuli Beg, as I love another, and in justice to me and to your friend you ought to tell him so.’

‘He knows all about it,’ said Mirza Ghias, ‘and is all the more anxious to have you as his wife, but I am surprised to find my sensible daughter so unreasonable. You think that Prince Salim loves you and would make you his queen. Foolish child, the Prince is like a bulbul and has trifled with many a sweet innocent flower and abandoned it for a new one. Even if he were to marry you, he would forget you in time, and you would be a

prisoner in the seraglio to the end of your days, to pine away like a caged bird, while Ali Kuli Beg will cherish you, and you will be the queen of his heart, his house, and his children.'

'Father, it is useless,' said Mihar-ul-Nissa, 'I love Prince Salim and shall love him all my life long.'

'My daughter,' said Mirza Ghias, 'you are foolish. Ali Kuli Beg would do all in his power to make you happy, while Prince Salim would relegate you to the dark depths of his harem to amuse yourself with the other ladies, and to pass your time in petty frivolities. My child, what can be dearer to me than your happiness? and I implore you to let the honest love of Ali Kuli Beg save you from the light wooing of the Prince, which must blast your peace, nay, your life, for ever, and lead you to peril and pain, to weary days and sleepless nights. Better a little fire that warms, than a great one that burns. Dost thou think that Prince Salim, the vain, the dissolute——'

'Cease, father,' said Mihar-ul-Nissa proudly, 'reprove me if you like, but lower not my esteem of you by slandering another.'

'What,' said Mirza Ghias bitterly, 'does one word of counsel chafe thee? I tell thee that if thou dreamest that Prince Salim loves thee as a man should love a maiden, thou deceivest thyself to thine own misery.'

'If I suffer,' said Mihar-ul-Nissa defiantly, 'I

suffer willingly and nobody has any right to interfere.'

'Child,' said Mirza Ghias firmly, 'it is our duty to safeguard your interests: we will not allow you to consign yourself to lifelong suffering and misery. We will marry you to Ali Kuli Beg, and though possibly you may make yourself a little unhappy at first, yet when you know your husband better, you will learn to love him: as for the Prince, a little resentment and a little absence will soon cure him of an ill-requited and ill-placed attachment. You do not know how easy it is to forget.'

'Ill-requited! Forget!' exclaimed Mihar-ul-Nissa. 'You do not know how I love him, and can never, never forget him; the fire which inflames my heart nothing in the world can quench. Say what you will, but I know that the Prince loves me ardently, and I assure you that he will not rest until he makes me his own. He told me as much, and I know he meant what he said.'

'Well,' said Mirza Ghias, 'his revenge will harm us alone, and I am prepared for everything, even to suffer for your sake, and so is Ali Kuli Beg, who is brave enough to wed you in spite of the rivalry of the Prince. He would not allow me to break off the engagement even if I wished; he is prepared to claim you in the open court of His Majesty. Your marriage with him is inevitable, accept your happiness cheerfully; I will not keep you long in

suspense. The marriage will take place on the second day of next moon.'

'You cannot marry me to that wild Persian against my will,' protested Mihar-ul-Nissa, 'if you persist you will be sorry for it.'

'Poor silly girl,' remarked Mirza Ghias, 'what can you do? We will see it through.'

'I will appeal to His Majesty, who calls himself the shadow of God upon earth,' replied Mihar-ul-Nissa. 'I will fling myself down before his throne and implore him to save me from this crowning misery.'

'You shall do nothing of the kind,' exclaimed Mirza Ghias, 'you shall not be permitted to move out. Besides His Majesty cannot do anything in the matter, the Law of the Prophet places you entirely in our hands to do with you as we will.'

'It may be so,' cried Mihar-ul-Nissa in despair, 'but His Majesty who has laid aside unjust laws, and worked out good laws, cannot but see the injustice of your action.'

'Injustice of my action,' burst out Ghias Beg angrily, 'why, I arranged a suitable match for you, what more can a parent do?'

'Yes, injustice of your actions,' insisted Mihar-ul-Nissa, 'you wish to sacrifice the happiness of a human being, whom God has placed in your hands for protection, in your eagerness to gratify some selfish motive of your own. Why, if my happiness

is dear to you, am I not allowed to have a voice in my own affairs? Why am I to marry against my will a man whom I hate from the bottom of my heart? But you ignore my protests, for it is not me you care about, but some false notion of honour which you prize more than the life of your daughter.'

'You cannot have any voice in the matter, because you cannot judge,' replied Ghias Beg, 'because you do not understand what is best for you. Can a father allow a child to handle a snake though he cry for it ever so? Let me assure you, my dear child, that I am doing it all for your welfare, and I am sure you will thank me in the end. I tell you once for all that you shall be married to Ali Kuli Beg this day next month, the second of the moon.'

'You cannot do it,' replied Mihar-ul-Nissa defiantly, 'if you persist, if you use force, I will destroy the life which you wish to throw away.'

'Blows the wind in this direction,' said Mirza Ghias, 'forewarned is forearmed; I will take care that you do nothing so rash.' He clapped his hands and calling in a eunuch, directed him to lead Mihar-ul-Nissa to her room and keep her a close prisoner.

Mihar-ul-Nissa, too proud to allow the eunuch to touch her with his hand, haughtily walked to her room, and the eunuch took his seat in front of the door as directed by Ghias Beg.

‘ Husband, dear husband,’ said Begum Ghias, ‘ you are very hasty. Why not postpone the marriage and allow Mihar-ul-Nissa to come round ? I do not see why it should take place so quickly.’

‘ Are you also in league with your rebellious daughter ? ’ asked Ghias Beg angrily. ‘ It is now or never. The Prince may return any day and then the marriage can never take place.’

‘ But, dear husband, if the Prince weds her himself, why, it will be such happiness for Mihar-ul-Nissa. Think a little and see if the course you have decided on is the best.’

‘ Nonsense,’ said Mirza Ghias. ‘ I have made up my mind and given my word of honour to Ali Kuli Beg, how can I go back from it ? Now, farewell. It is time for me to go to Court,’ and without another word, he walked swiftly out of the seraglio.

CHAPTER XI

JEHANGIR, with a large army, swept across the plains of Rajputana like a thundercloud, eager to vanquish the gallant Rana of Odeypore, who hated the very idea that 'the son of Bapa Raweel should bow his head to a mortal man,' and spurned every overture from the mighty Akbar, which had submission for its basis, or the degradation of uniting his family by marriage with a Tartar, though he was lord of countless millions. The mere thought of a foreigner ruling over a people which he regarded as his own, was intolerable to his stern and independent nature.

He had vowed to strain every nerve to free his country from a foreign rule, or die in the attempt. The odds against him were great, the very people he wanted to save were leagued with his foes, and the arms of his own countrymen, nay, his own relatives were raised against him. His brother was with the invading army, and his dear kinsman, Raja Man Singh, commanded the invading forces and led Pertab's beloved Rajputs. But the magnitude of the peril only served to confirm the indomitable fortitude of the royal Pertab, who

vowed in the words of the bard 'to make his mother's milk resplendent.'

He had chosen an admirable defensive position in the valley of Hudhi Ghat, which lay in the heart of the mountains of Irawali, spreading over a circumference of eighty miles. The approaches to it were guarded by narrow defiles, lofty perpendicular rocks and natural ramparts, and the valley was at the base of a neck of a mountain which enclosed it and rendered it almost inaccessible.

It was here that the Rana with a force of 23,000 horse, and scattered bands of aboriginal Bhils, had resolved to give battle to the numerous Mogul army. From his halting-place stretched rays of hardy Bhils, ready to defend every inch of ground, and manning every cliff and pinnacle, armed with bows and arrows and with piles of huge stones ready to roll upon the advancing enemy.

Prince Salim, who longed to return to his beloved, pushed hurriedly on into the heart of the valley. The Bhils showered arrows like rain on his men, and every arrow that flew from their skilled hands claimed a victim, but they were helpless against the imperial batteries which kept up an incessant fire. Clan after clan of the faithful Bhils with desperate courage resisted the foe, and sacrificed their lives on the sacred altar of freedom and glory, but their courage was unavailing and they were powerless to check the imperial army.

It was about eleven in the morning when the

Rana, who had just finished his ablutions and devotions, sat down to breakfast with about 20,000 Rajputs, the flower of his army. After the desolation of Chittour, Pertab had vowed never to dine from gold plate, or sleep on a bed, and to further mark his fallen fortunes, had ordered the drummers to follow the Rajput Cavalry, instead of preceding it, until the glory of the Rajputs was redeemed. So the food was placed before the Rana and his comrades on broad plantain leaves. The Rana passed on his leaf of food to the chief of Jhalla as a mark of favour, who received it with greatest reverence. At that moment a shell dropped just in front of the Rana, who did not wince, but went on calmly with his breakfast. Another hissed past him, but he was reluctant to rise before he had finished, and unconcernedly raised a morsel to his mouth, when a third dropped in his leafy plate.

This was more than he could endure, his fearless soul rebelled against the idea of quitting this earth without encountering his enemy. He rose and washed his hands as did his 20,000 followers, and when all had finished, the conches blew, the drums roared, and the Rana turning to them thus addressed his men :—

‘ My friends ! my followers ! my children ! the field which we are about to enter is one from which there is no retreat. There we must conquer or die, to save our ancient country from a foreign

rule. Our laws have been broken, our homes violated, our temples polluted, our bread snatched from our mouths, our chiefs have sold their honour to that broker in the market of our race, and sacrificed their country, their dharma (duty) for inglorious repose. India turns to you for rescue, and may God keep you to save it. What Rajput would part with honour for aught this unreal world has to offer? Our hearts are no longer our own, our kingdoms are overthrown and despoiled, and our homes made the banquet hall of Tartars. It is better to die than to live as slaves in our own country. The order I have ever given in battle, I give now: fight for the freedom of your mother land, for the honour of your women, for the laws and dharma of your country. What can be more welcome to a Kshatria than a holy war, opening for him the gates of heaven? Happy the Kshatria who has the good fortune to meet a brave foe and die fighting. If you conquer, you enjoy the kingdoms of earth, if you die, Apsaras wait to welcome you in brightest heaven. Now forward, strike down every plumed crest, but spare those who seek your protection. Hark! the enemy's cannon speak. Up standards! Beat the drums! To horse! May God grant us a glorious victory or a glorious grave! On, my gallant friends, on!

As he concluded he sprang to his splendid horse, and lightly swung over his head his terrible

sword, which had smitten down, as grass before the reaper, the chivalry of many a field; his crimson banner fluttered gaily in the air, his golden umbrella shaded his face, and ere the last blast of the reverberating conches died, the sun-born Rajputs swept through the enemy's ranks like living fire through a dry forest,—their effulgent swords gleamed,—drops like rubies fell from their blades.

The Mogul army recoiled in confusion and dismay, men actually threw down their arms and took to flight, even the bigoted and devout Mullah Badouni, who had come with the imperial forces with the desire of acquiring merit by killing the infidels, and who often used to preach that —‘the repentance of a person who fled from a holy war was never accepted by God,’ forgot his own teachings and took to his heels, not stopping until he had placed some three miles between himself and the terrible Rajputs. Hewing a path broad and clear through streams of blood and over headless bodies or dismembered corpses rode the Rana and his Rajputs, and slew as they rode ever onward. Fiercest of all was the Rana himself. When his lance shivered or his sword flashed, or he drew his gigantic mace from its sling by the saddle-bow, woe to all who attempted to cross his path. The centre of the Mogul army seemed to reel and whirl round the broadening gap through its ranks, as the waves round some chasm in a maelstrom, but they dashed in vain against

the adamant Rana, and recoiled with greater force, sweeping away their own rank and file. The Rana steadily pushed onward and at last met the elephant which carried Prince Salim. The imperial life guards fled before Pertab, and made way for him to advance ; with a sweep of his mighty lance he brushed aside the driver as his steed reared and struck out with its front feet at the head of the elephant when the lance shivered in pieces against the steel plates of the howdah. The infuriated animal, now having no one to control it, ran away and carried off the Prince from his foe. But for this the gallant Pertab would have deprived Akbar of his heir.

The carnage was tremendous. The imperial forces, urged by the perilous position of their Prince, closed round Pertab, but the Rana shot meteor-like from rank to rank, clearing a path wherever he turned, and after a short while the Mogul army began to retreat. Then Raja Man Singh advanced with his body of Rajput horse. Still the untiring might of the Rana defied the press of numbers that swept tide upon tide around him, still the crimson banner fluttered in the air, and his sword continued to flash like lightning in a dark cloud, still his mighty charger spurned the earth and carried him with as much ease and lightness as the racer bears his light burden. The steed was scarcely less terrible to encounter than the sweep of the Rana's sword or his gigantic

mace, which broke heads as a stone breaks an earthen pot, and no serried ranks could resist the charge of the horse and the rider.

‘Where is Man Singh, where is the traitor?’ cried Rana Pertab, as he raged among the enemy like a famished lion. ‘Why does he not come before me that I may strike off his treacherous head?’

‘I am here,’ cried a voice from behind, ‘meet me before you seek Man Singh again.’

‘Back Sakat, back boy,’ said the Rana in a tremulous voice, ‘it is not my own brother that I would kill.’

‘Not so, my liege,’ said Sakat calmly, ‘I left your hearth and joined the Mogul forces that I might meet you as an equal in battle, and revenge the insult which you offered me when under the paternal roof. Here all memories die, lay on and spare not.’

‘Strike if it please you,’ said Rana Pertab sheathing his sword, ‘I would not stain my hands with the blood of my own brother.’

Sakat was moved, conquered, and he turned aside as the Rana shot through the crowd and darted on Man Singh, who had now come up on his elephant, which rushed at the gallant Chatak carrying the Rana, who with a single blow dashed aside the mahout; the elephant was about to retreat when Raja Man Singh jumped into the driver’s place and urged it onwards. Fresh and panting for glory the Mogul Rajput reserve

poured in and drove away the Rana. The tramp of horses, the clash of steel, and the whiz and hiss of arrows marked the place where the Rana still hewed a gory path, and whither like vultures flocked the imperial army.

Man by man the Rana's gallant band of Rajputs sacrificed themselves to save their chief, emulating his dauntless courage. But he was now sorely pressed, his saffron dress was in tatters, his blood flowed from seven wounds which he had received, staining his saddle cloth, but still his spirit was unconquered, and ready to do fresh deeds of glory ; still he held the crimson banner firmly in his hand, which collected the might of the Mogul army against him ; and still he charged into their ranks, driving them back each charge, further and further. The immense multitude recoiled before him to close round him again, hounding him on to the lion's death.

The great chiefs and his devoted knights, though greatly reduced in numbers, still fought on, and thrice rescued Rana Pertab from amidst the foe ; but they were now overwhelmed, and the Rana must have lost his life, had not the chief of Jhalla sacrificed his own to save that of the Rana.

'All is lost,' said the chief of Jhalla, approaching Rana Pertab with great respect.

'Not while we live,' replied Rana Pertab, 'not while there is breath in my lungs or blood in my veins.'

‘True,’ replied the Jhalla chief, ‘on you depends the welfare of your country. Save yourself, and you may yet redeem the lost glory of Rajasthan. There is yet time to escape.’

‘Pertab flees not alive from the field of battle, and as long as there is a single foe to encounter,’ answered the Rana, as his eyes flashed fire on his noble knight. ‘Counsel me not to tarnish my name.’

‘I only ask you to save yourself for your country,’ entreated the chief of Jhalla, ‘because the hope of your country lies in you. I ask you to do so for the sake of your country, for the protection and honour of our women. It is only a battle lost, and if you live you may yet drive back these craven-hearted Moguls. Escape, and we will screen your path with our bodies.’

‘Courage,’ said the Rana, ‘we may yet drive them back. Had anyone but you counselled me to escape I would have struck him dead.’

‘My Liege, my Sovereign, my Prince,’ exclaimed the chief of Jhalla, ‘look back on your band, and see how many of the 20,000 Rajputs who rode with you this morning are still with you now, and then at the countless hosts which are closing in from all sides. Have we not beaten back the Prince from the field? Did not even the Pandus retire to return again in triumph? Have pity on your country, and for the sake of your people, to save the honour of our women and the life of

our nation, save your own. What is flight? Even Sri Krishna fled from the field and yet returned.'

'True,' said Pertab, 'I may yet live to show them the way to their country on the keen edge of my sword.'

'Go,' urged the chief of Jhalla, 'and God may bless your sword with victory.'

'I go,' said the Rana. 'Farewell!'

'Farewell, my lord,' said the chief of Jhalla, as he took the crimson banner in his hand, and unfurled the golden sun of the royal umbrella over his own head, 'we meet again in heaven.'

'In heaven,' said Pertab, 'and before long.'

The Rana cleared his way through the enemy's ranks to his own mountainous country, while the chief of Jhalla, by displaying the insignia of royalty, drew the brunt of battle after him, and with his followers covered the retreat of his master.

He fought manfully, and heads dropped before his sword as flowers before a mighty storm, but his courage was unavailing against such odds, and at last he and his faithful vassals quitted this earth on fairy chariots which awaited them to take their souls to the heaven of heroes.

In remembrance of this deed the Jhalla chiefs still carry the insignia of the Mewar, and enjoy the right hand of their Princes.

A number of the Moguls had recognised the

Rana as he pressed through their ranks like a flaming dart, and resolved to give him pursuit, but the noble Chatak disdained the earth, and passed through them like the wind.

Sakat, whose heart had already been touched by his brother's nobility, lost all idea of resentment when he saw the blue horse flying unattended, and a feeling of affection, mingling with sad and humiliating recollection, took possession of him, and he joined in the pursuit, only to slay the pursuers, who fell beneath his lance.

Chatak was tired and bleeding in many places, and Sakat was soon able to overtake his brother, and for the first time they embraced in friendship. As the Rana dismounted Chatak shivered and fell dead, and while his master stooped to kiss the faithful animal, Sakat lost no time in unbuckling the saddle, which he placed on his own horse Onkar Rao, requesting his brother to mount without losing time, and continue his flight.

'Forgive me, I beseech you,' said Sakat. 'Had I not joined the Mogul army, and led them to these hills, the Rana of Udaipur would not have had to flee unattended.'

'Blame not yourself,' said Pertab, 'we are but instruments of a wiser will. My karma has spared me, and I believe for some purpose.'

'How does a man feel when flying for life?' said Sakat by way of a joke.

‘A gallant soldier retires but to return,’ said Pertab. ‘He dwells on the future which still lures him on.’

‘God bless you,’ said Sakat. ‘When you return you will find me at your side in my proper place.’

‘Farewell,’ said the Rana. ‘You have given me hope, and may God bless you for it.’

He turned, and in a moment was lost to sight in a cloud of dust.

Rana Pertab had not gone very far when Salim with Raja Man Singh appeared.

‘Where is Pertab?’ asked Salim. ‘How far do you think he has gone?’

‘Beyond your reach,’ sullenly replied Sakat. ‘I do not think he can be overtaken now. It is more than an hour since he turned on me and two others who were in pursuit of him. There lie their headless bodies.’

‘Man, you lie,’ said Prince Salim. ‘There lies his dead horse, and he could not have gone far. Tell me the truth and on my word of honour I promise to forgive you.’

‘Then know the truth, Prince,’ said Sakat boldly: ‘I gave him my horse to ride. The burden of this great kingdom is on my brother’s shoulders, and I could not witness his danger without helping him. I killed his pursuers, and aided him to escape on my fresh horse.’

‘So you betrayed me? That is to be expected



SAKAT BIDS FAREWELL TO THE RANA

from a man who betrayed his own brother,' remarked Salim. 'However, I promised to forgive you, so you can now follow him. I cannot keep you in my camp.'

'My gracious Prince,' said Sakat, 'I desire nothing more,' and mounting a horse, which a follower gave him, he disappeared into the hills.

'Shall we go on, Raja Man Singh?' asked Salim. 'We may yet overtake him and put out the fire-brand for ever, which if left alone may break into a conflagration again.'

'I entirely agree with your Highness,' said the Raja, whose heart had melted on seeing the danger of his gallant kinsman, and who had forgotten the insult which the Rana had once offered him. 'I entirely agree with your Highness,' he repeated, 'but it is difficult to pursue him, the paths are intricate and the ground unknown, and it would be hazardous to push on. The Rana may debouch from one of his hiding-places, and turn our victory to defeat, while if we wait until morning, we lose nothing.'

'You may be right,' said Prince Salim, to whom the idea of Pertab appearing from some mountain cave and renewing the fight was not at all pleasant. He loved comfort more than the perils and inconveniences of war.

'We had better return and celebrate the victory which God has vouchsafed us,' said he.

They accordingly returned to camp, and, amid the carnage which marked the field of battle, thanked God for His mercy in helping him to slay His own creatures no less dear to Him than the victors.

CHAPTER XII

MIHAR-UL-NISSA was seated in her room. The morning sun shone over the small and perfumed chamber, but it brought no light to the fair girl's love-sick heart. The unwonted negligence of her dress, the picturesque disorder of her pretty room, betrayed the state of her mind. Her beautiful hair fell dishevelled over her shoulders, and her eyes were lustreless like overcast skies after rain. Before her lay an open book (Sadi's *Bostan*) which she had just been reading, and which still absorbed her thoughts as she soliloquised in low, sweet tones.

‘This is love,’ she murmured, ‘not the love which burns within my heart and mingles with feelings of my selfish satisfactions and pleasures. I am weak, and must gather strength and learn to sacrifice myself. How beautifully the immortal Sadi has put it, “The moth asked the candle why she shed tears, while it was he who ought to burn and feed the flame?” The candle laughed and said, “O fool, without patience and self-control love is not for such as thou; you flutter about, an unripe flame, but look at me, here I stand to be

entirely consumed. The love has only scorched your wings, but look at me, I burn from head to foot. If you want to learn love, learn to find pleasure in burning yourself.”

‘My daughter,’ said a voice behind her, ‘what ails thee?’

‘You, mother,’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa starting up. ‘I was so lost in my thoughts that I did not notice you as you came in. I am delighted to see you,’ she added, a ray of hope coming into her heart.

‘Child,’ said the old nurse, ‘I only heard to-day that you were going to be married, and so I hastened to you in the hope of being of some use. I could not believe that they could have got your consent, and am glad to find that I was not wrong.’

‘It is so kind, so good of you to have come,’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa softly, lightly kissing her shrivelled hand. ‘How did you manage to come to me alone? I am not allowed to see any one.’

‘Why, I talked a good deal to your simple, foolish mother,’ replied the crafty nurse, ‘and persuaded her to let me see you alone, and convince you of the folly of your pining away for my Prince.’

‘But, dear mother,’ eagerly inquired Mihar-ul-Nissa, ‘is it true that they have quite made up their minds to marry me at once?’

‘So it seems, my daughter,’ replied the nurse,

‘ unless we find means to prevent it. They have everything ready, the formal ceremonies may even begin to-day and the marriage take place a day or two later.’

‘ My love, my God,’ gasped the girl, and fell in a swoon. The nurse rose and bathed her forehead with rose water, fanned her face and softly rubbed her feet. After a little Mihar-ul-Nissa recovered, and opening her eyes, asked for a cup of water.

‘ Cheer up, dear child,’ said the nurse, ‘ there is many a slip between the cup and lip, and the Prince may yet prevent the marriage.’

‘ Ah,’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa, ‘ you are really my guardian angel sent from heaven to guide me,’ and taking a pen she impulsively wrote these words :—

‘ My Prince, they have decided on my marriage, which takes place three or four days hence. Save me if you can, otherwise when you return you will find no more the silly girl who loves with all the intensity of her heart, and in whose ears the sweet tones of your voice ring with an unfaltering harmony. True to death, your own Mihar-ul-Nissa.’

She carefully folded the note and handed it to the nurse.

‘ You will send it at once, dear mother, will you not ? There is not a moment to be lost.’

‘ Surely,’ said the nurse rising ; ‘ I will not delay a moment in sending it on to the Prince.’

‘Thanks, thanks, dear mother,’ exclaimed Mihar-ul-Nissa, ‘you have been so good, so kind to me.’

‘Child,’ said the nurse kissing her, ‘I love the Prince, and his darling cannot but be dear to me. Now good-bye, and may God bless you.’

Thus saying the old nurse tottered out of the room and joining Begum Ghias, amused her by talking little nothings, and ending her visit, returned to her home.

Although old, the nurse was not slow in her movements, when once she made up her mind, and she immediately summoned a sowar (rider) and giving him the letter, bade him ride day and night and deliver it into the hands of the Prince. This done she returned to her own room to think over matters.

The old nurse had hardly left the house of Ghias Beg when a string of palanquins preceded by drums and pipes arrived before the gate, and a party of young ladies with a large number of maid servants got out of the palanquins with great formality and blandishments, and were received with song and music by Begum Ghias and her friends, who, singing and laughing, led them to Mihar-ul-Nissa’s room to perform the ceremony of *Sachiq*. Mihar-ul-Nissa was sitting there listlessly with eyes bent on *Bostan*, which still lay in her lap.

‘What a radiant beauty,’ exclaimed Begum Superara, Ali Kuli Beg’s sister, who had come to

perform the ceremony of Sachiq. 'What an irresistible charm.'

'How fascinating,' added a cousin of Ali Kuli Beg's. 'What heavenly eyes.'

'Sister,' said Superara drawing nearer, 'why do you not speak?'

'She is so modest,' interposed Begum Ghias, 'and so bashful, you cannot expect her to talk to you at the first meeting. Let us proceed with the ceremony.'

'True,' said Ali Kuli Beg's sister, 'she seems to be shy. I am charmed to have such a sister-in-law.'

Further conversation was interrupted as the room filled with the ladies of the house and servant maids who came with baskets full of rich cloths and precious ornaments, delicious sweets, fragrant cosmetics, perfumed hair oils, nuts and fruits, and garlands of rose and jasmine. They took some garlands and placed them ceremoniously round Mihar-ul-Nissa's neck, and then gently placed two diamond rings in her ears. The room echoed with the sounds of blessings and congratulations from all who had come. Mihar-ul-Nissa's relatives scattered rose and keora water on their guests, and showered on them gold and silver lace cut into powder. Every one seemed full of life and joy except Mihar-ul-Nissa, who rebelled against all this gaiety on her behalf. She longed to fling aside the earrings and flowers, and order Superara

Begum to leave the room, but something seemed to control her power of action, and she sat mute and miserable.

At last, to her great relief, in the midst of much gaiety which cut to her heart like knives, the ladies took their leave, throwing money to the assembled maids and embracing each other as they left.

In Indian marriages when once the ceremonies begin they continue till the marriage is finally over. The ladies, set free from their usual seclusion, vie with each other in creating amusement and excitement. The ceremony of *Sachiq* being over the *Manjha* was sent to the bridegroom. The presents of Ghias Beg and his wife were magnificent. There was a sandal-wood chowki covered with silver, with all the articles of toilet placed upon it, such as gold and silver jugs and basins with gilded engravings, betel boxes of gold filigree work. There was also a diamond ring of immense value, a fine muslin gown for the marriage, a gold embroidered Benares kamarband, trousers of heavy cloth of gold, a priceless shawl and a diamond aigrette, with clusters of pearls hanging from it. All were artistically arranged in baskets and carried by bearers in purple liveries.

There were hundreds of baskets of myrtle leaves and hinna, baskets of cut gold thread, of sweet scented flowers and artificial nosegays. A procession of servants in bright scarlet liveries was formed and wended its way to the house of Ali Kuli

Beg, carrying hundreds of little lights in their baskets which twinkled and glowed like stars in the night.

The presents were received with due ceremony and carried into the inner yard of the mansion. There Ali Kuli Beg awaited their arrival, surrounded by the ladies of the house, under a canopy hung with garlands of jasmine flowers.

As soon as the Manjha arrived, the song and the ceremonies began.

Men servants anointed Ali Kuli Beg with sweet scented oils sent by Begum Ghias, bathed him in rose water, and dressed him in the proper marriage gown, sent by his father-in-law, while the ladies from behind the screen gave directions and sang songs.

Ali Kuli Beg obeyed the ladies without a murmur and silently did what they bade him. When he was dressed they dyed his fingers with hinna, placed the wedding bangle in his hand, and tied his turban, receiving gold mohurs and precious jewels for the performance of these petty services. When Ali Kuli Beg stepped from under the canopy, bombs were let off, rockets went up to the skies, and the roar of drums and pipes announced the closing of the ceremony.

Next evening the marriage party started with great pomp and splendour, accompanied by gorgeously caparisoned elephants and horses, borrowed from the Emperor for the occasion,

and splendidly dressed cavaliers, who were preceded by parties of drummers and pipers in scarlet. A band of mace-bearers, carrying gold and silver maces, walked in front crying 'Make way, make way!' and were followed by a party of boys who burned incense and sprinkled rose water on the road. Dancing-girls in gay and flowery dresses danced upon soft thick carpets which covered moving thrones, carried by gaily liveried bearers. Their delicate hands were raised, and the silver bells tinkled in harmony with their melodious voices, which were lost amid the general noise and rejoicing. At very short intervals bombs and rockets whizzed up and fell in bright scintillating showers.

Ali Kuli Beg was dressed in a light saffron robe which reached his ankles, and loosely held at the waist by a Benares kamarband displayed his strong fine frame as he towered a head above his friends. The pearl strings of the marriage chaplet veiled his brown manly face, as he rode silently on his ambling horse. His friends showered over his head gold and silver coins, which were provided by him, and were freely scrambled for by the assembled crowd which followed the marriage procession.

All the houses along the streets were thronged by eager spectators and veiled forms whose eyes, through delicate veils, eagerly watched the unusual spectacle.

The marriage party did not reach the house of the bride till after nightfall. A party of gentlemen came out to receive them, and conducted them to the tents erected for the guests, provided with all the luxuries that money could procure or art invent, and there they were at once served with cool and deliciously perfumed sherbets, light refreshments, and fruit.

Two hours before midnight the bridegroom was invited into the seraglio. Mounting his horse he appeared at the gate, and was received by all the assembled ladies who ceremoniously poured the water from Mihar-ul-Nissa's bath, which had been purposely kept, at the feet of the horse. Then Ali Kuli Beg dismounted and was conducted to the inner apartments. They led him to the same chowki (a low seat) where they had made Mihar-ul-Nissa take her bath, and then they put round his neck one of her saris as they sang in chorus, 'Here you are entangled, let some one set you free.'

Ali Kuli Beg flung to the assembled singers a handful of gold mohars, the sari was removed and he was led to a velvet carpet seat where they all sat round him. The young girls made a lion and a sheep out of the cosmetics which they had preserved from the *Manjha* ceremony, and placing a silver lamp between these they desired Ali Kuli Beg to say 'I am a sheep and she a lion.'

'But why should I say so?' protested Ali Kuli Beg.

‘You must,’ insisted a young lady.

‘I will not,’ said Ali Kuli Beg, ‘though it is hard to refuse when the request comes from such sweet lips.’

‘A truce to your flatteries,’ said the young lady, ‘we will lead you such a dance that you will remember it all your life.’

‘His shoes must be stolen,’ said one.

‘His garments stitched to the carpet,’ said another.

‘He must place the shoes of Mihar-ul-Nissa on his head and promise to be a slave to her,’ suggested a third.

‘He will do all that and more without a murmur. It is not easy to get a winsome bride,’ remarked a fourth.

‘Who can refuse to do anything when fairies desire it,’ said the gallant Persian, quite conquered. ‘If it please you so, here I say, “I am a sheep and she is a lion.”’

‘There,’ said the young girls bursting into laughter, ‘he will obey us like a slave.’

The young girls called him by many names, made him do many silly little things which he did with right good humour, and laughed at his compliments.

It was midnight when the ceremonies were over, and the time for the marriage to take place arrived. Ali Kuli Beg was led to the bride’s apartments, and a Kazi summoned to perform the marriage ceremony.

Ghias Beg had failed to win the consent of his daughter to her marriage with Ali Kuli Beg. She refused all overtures with great determination. As a last resource they had put her under opium for the occasion. She was quite unconscious when the ceremony began, and Begum Ghias supported her in a sitting position. The Kazi went through the usual formalities with great solemnity, and at last at that part of the service, where, according to the marriage ritual, the consent of the parties is demanded, the Kazi turning to Ali Kuli Beg said, 'My son, do you accept Mihar-ul-Nissa as your bride, be she lame or disfigured?'

'I do accept her,' replied the bridegroom with great emphasis.

There was a brief pause, and then the priest turning to Mihar-ul-Nissa, asked, 'And you, daughter?' He repeated the question three times, but no reply came.

'She consents,' said Mirza Ghias, impatiently; 'she is so modest, so nervous, so shy, she cannot speak in the presence of strangers. Her silence is equal to consent.'

'True,' said the Kazi, closing the ceremony, and bestowing the nuptial benediction, he announced that Mirza Ghias Beg had settled two lakhs of gold mohurs as a *haqmaker* (dowry) on his daughter. He then withdrew, amply rewarded and heavily laden with precious presents.

As soon as the Kazi had gone the ladies came

in and began their ceremonies again. They placed a large looking-glass in front of the bride and bridegroom and then suddenly lifted the veil from the face of Mihar-ul-Nissa, and Ali Kuli Beg for the first time saw the face of his wife in the looking-glass, as it shone out on him in all its overpowering beauty. Even the necklace of pearls fastened by a clasp of diamonds, which fell on her bosom, seemed to borrow its lustre from her glorious face. Ali Kuli Beg shaded his eyes and so did not notice that hers were closed, nor the unnatural flush of her face. It was nearly morning when the ceremonies were finally over, and Ali Kuli Beg was allowed to retire to his camp.

Early next morning the dowry was displayed, most comprehensive and of immense value. There were gold ornaments set with precious stones for the hair, chaplets of rare pearls, nose- and ear-rings in which sparkled diamonds and rubies, necklaces of pearls and rubies and sapphires, bangles and bracelets, tinkling anklets for the feet and ankles, delicate pendants and chains, dresses of real cloth of gold and softest velvet, silver and gold plate. There were also brass and copper utensils, bed and bedding, chairs and furniture, valuable robes for the bridegroom and his relatives and friends. A silver palanquin for Mihar-ul-Nissa, and many other things too numerous to detail.

Mirza Ghias had done more than even his rank

and position demanded, and his generosity was acknowledged with praise and admiration by the guests. The dowry was made over to the agents of the bridegroom, and then a most sumptuous repast was served to the members of the marriage party. They sat down to dine on a pile of carpets covered with a white cloth. Young slaves in smartest liveries bore round to each of the guests silver basins of perfumed water and napkins edged with gold fringes. When the guests had washed their hands, dishes full of delicacies were laid before them. There were quails and partridges, fish and lobster, pilaus and kurmas, and a hundred sweet and salted things displayed in plates $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches in diameter, cooked in different ways; some were coloured with saffron, others perfumed with musk, some daintily cooked in rose water and others flavoured with keora. A party of dancing girls, singing and dancing, now leading their melodies into soft strains of hope and love, and then rising to still gayer moods, then again becoming plaintive and yearning, entertained the company. At last the dinner was over, cardamons and betels were served, and the guests rose to depart.

Mihar-ul-Nissa, still under the influence of opium, was placed in the palanquin, the women singers chanted the sad songs of parting, bringing tears to the eyes of her relatives, and the leave-taking was over. Ali Kuli Beg triumphantly marched

home with his bride, showering gold and silver over her palanquin. On reaching the house of her husband, Mihar-ul-Nissa was carried into a beautiful room that was prepared for her. They laid her on a soft bed and tried to rouse her, but failing, they told Ali Kuli Beg. He came anxiously in, longing to see his wife alone, and ordered the attendants to leave him for a moment. His request was granted by the ladies with some reluctance and humorous remarks.

‘Eh wah,’ said one lady, ‘how impatient you are. She will always live with you. Why such haste?’

‘He has already lost his heart,’ added another.

‘And his modesty too,’ quoth a third.

Ali Kuli Beg quietly submitted and thus gained his wishes.

When alone he closed the door and tried to revive Mihar-ul-Nissa. After a great deal of trouble she opened her eyes and gazed in astonishment all round. She rubbed her eyes, and then sitting up in bed murmured, ‘Am I dreaming? Where am I?’

‘You are in your own home,’ said Ali Kuli Beg, stepping forward; ‘in the house of your loving husband.’

‘Husband,’ shrieked Mihar-ul-Nissa, jumping off the bed, and running to the door.

‘Beloved,’ said Ali Kuli Beg, holding her gently by the hand, ‘pray calm yourself.’

‘How horrid looks your sheepskin hat,’ cried Mihar-ul-Nissa, disengaging herself and for the first time looking at her husband, as her eyes shot fire and her cheeks glowed with indignation.

‘How beautiful,’ murmured Ali Kuli Beg. ‘What charm. Forgive me, dearest,’ he added drawing nearer.

‘Touch me,’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa snatching a dagger that lay in the room, ‘and I will kill myself.’

‘Strike me if you please,’ said Ali Kuli Beg in a tone of entreaty, ‘colour it in my blood, but touch not a hair of yourself.’

‘If you love me,’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa as a thought flashed through her mind, ‘regard me as a friend only, for six months.’

‘Cruel one,’ said the enamoured Persian, ‘I promise what you ask. Had you asked me to give up life I would gladly have done it.’

‘You promise on your word of honour before God, with your face towards Mecça?’ asked Mihar-ul-Nissa.

‘I do,’ said Ali Kuli Beg.

‘Then we can be friends,’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa, as she proffered her hand to be kissed. Ali Kuli Beg departed transported with joy as if he had drunk the waters of immortality in that kiss.

CHAPTER XIII

THE mellow light of the moon shone serenely on the field of battle. The Shiraz wine sparkled in the crystal cups, as Prince Salim and his companions joyfully celebrated their victory and already planned their return to the capital and its pleasures; completely forgetful of the murderous harvest of the morning, with its life-long desolation and blighting of all hope and love for many a human soul. The Prince was already thinking of Mihar-ul-Nissa. This idea was even more intoxicating than the warm kisses of the daughter of the grape, so that he paid no heed to the message, which the heavy air tainted with human agony brought to him from the dead and the wounded, whispering of the uncertainty of all human greatness, and futility of all ambition. Its still, small voice was drowned in loud songs and heartless vibrations of musical instruments which refused to be melodious when the moans of those in pain travelled over their sensitive strings.

‘What a grand victory,’ said Prince Salim after draining three cups of wine. ‘God has been very merciful to me.’

‘Sire,’ said a courtier, ‘you are no less than a God. The wretched Rajput speared the driver and brought misfortune on himself. The enraged elephant trampled his men to death as he carried Your Highness to victory.’

‘Nay,’ said the Prince generously, ‘Rana Pertab is brave as a lion. I wish I had him as my ally.’

‘He does not deserve such high honour,’ replied the courtier. ‘There are thousands braver than he eager to touch the dust at your feet and make it the collyrium of their eyes. It was sheer madness on the part of the Rana to think of opposing your Highness.’

‘He is no doubt a man of feeling and cannot endure the shame of defeat,’ quoth a third courtier; ‘he has left his men on the field and gone alone to drown himself in the holy Ganges.’

‘To secure for himself the kingdom of heaven,’ laughed the Prince; ‘may he travel to heaven on the crest of the wave of the holy Ganges.’

‘Amen,’ said a devout Moslem. ‘May the fires of hell consume the infidel.’

‘I will tell His Majesty,’ said the Prince with a laugh, ‘what, according to you, awaits his friends after death.’

‘For God’s sake, do not betray me,’ said the Maulvi. ‘That heretic, Abul Fazal, and that accursed jester, Bir Bal, have led His Majesty away from the religion of the prophet, and they will kill me by mere cross-examination. They have had

their day,' he added in a lower voice, ' the day of retribution cannot be very far. I hope soon to have the good fortune of congratulating your Highness. . . .'

Prince Salim was about to make a reply, when a page entered and respectfully kneeling said, ' A messenger has come from Agra with a letter, and requests an audience of Your Highness.'

' Tell him to wait,' said the Prince abruptly, ' I will see him to-morrow.'

' Sire,' said the page making another low bow, ' he says he has urgent business, and must see Your Highness at once.'

' Ask him who has sent him,' said Prince Salim. ' We now need no instructions from the court, for the victory has been gained. Pass round the cup,' he added to the boy who served the wine, ' brimful with heavenly nectar that I may dream of my beloved.'

' Fair one,' he said to a beautiful dancing girl, ' enkindle my cup with thine image, that it may rouse my blossoming heart to full flower. Let the wine flow like the fiery liquid of spring, touching every heart into life and happiness. Why deniest thou, O Saqi, this water of life for the human soul, when the queen of the year sits enshrined in the heart of a rose, half revealed and half concealed by its delicate veil of petals. Tell the holy Shaikh not to waste his life in empty prayers, if he desires everlasting life let him espouse the

queen of grape and moisten his lips with the nectar flowing from her ruby petals. Tell him to drink on the river bank when the Muezzin calls to prayers. What joy will be mine,' continued the Prince, 'when my beloved, like a rosebud, nestles in my arms holding a cup of wine to my lips. For such a day I would give away a kingdom. Poor saints, simple fools, they seek everlasting joy and give up what they regard as transitory happiness, and are proud of their renunciation. Every fool works for his wages, but we, the votaries of love and wine, scorn everlasting paradise for a moment of bliss on this earth, and leave the rest to him.'

'Wah, wah,' shouted the courtiers, 'we are greater than all the selfish saints and Maulvies.'

Wine flowed freely so that the Prince and his companions were half drunk when the messenger was admitted.

'Who—who art thou?' stammered the Prince.

'Your most humble servant,' murmured the page, 'the letter is not from His Majesty, but from a lady who directed that it must be delivered into Your Highness's hands at once and alone.'

'Will you read the letter?' asked a courtier respectfully.

'Letter! which letter?' said the drunken Prince, his head in a whirl. 'A curse on this messenger say I. Am I always to be bothered with business when I have just won a grand victory?'

The other courtiers expressed their approval

and with peals of laughter drove the page away. They continued to drink, until none were sober.

The pages managed to put the Prince to bed, and his companions were carried away to their tents.

A new morning had smiled over the field of battle with its usual freshness and glory, and drawn past noon when the Prince, after restlessly tossing about on his bed, raised himself and discovered his favourite page standing as usual by the bed.

‘Fill up the morning cup,’ said the Prince, ‘my head aches and I am full of pain.’

The page at once presented the cup which he had already prepared and the Prince emptied it in a single draught. It seemed to revive him, and throwing the coverlet aside he sat up and asked :

‘What news ? Have they been able to find the Rana ?’

‘No, sire,’ replied the page, ‘our men have returned and report that they could not find him.’

‘May Satan overtake him,’ said the Prince, ‘he has escaped again. Anything else that you wish to say ?’

‘There was a letter for Your Highness from Agra from some great lady which I brought to Your Highness last night, but Your Highness was . . .’

‘Too drunk to read,’ said the Prince completing the sentence, ‘no matter, it cannot be of much importance. Bring it to me now, it will perhaps divert my thoughts.’

The page made a bow and disappeared, and

after a short while returned and placed the letter in the hands of the Prince, who lazily opened it. As his eyes glanced over the little scented paper, his cheeks flushed and then grew pale as saffron flowers. Jumping out of bed, he read and re-read the letter, his face reddening and his eyes becoming bloodshot, as at last he cried out in rage, 'I will tear down the throne of my father if he permits her to be married to another.' Then he tried to calm himself and began to pace about his tent, now and then stopping to take an oath, or declare eternal revenge upon his enemies.

'Look you,' he cried, shaking Mirza Ibrahim, who had just entered with some other courtiers, by the shoulders, 'they are going to marry Mihar-ul-Nissa to Ali Kuli Beg. My father seems to connive at their proceedings, but you may change my name, if I do not win my Mihar-ul-Nissa in spite of them all.'

'I am deeply grieved,' said Ibrahim with sincere expressions of sympathy, 'that this should have happened. How came Your Highness to know that the marriage is to take place? His Majesty, I am told, is away from Agra.'

'Here is a letter from my beloved herself, telling me that it may take place any day,' answered Salim. 'For aught I know it may have been celebrated already.'

'There is yet hope,' said Ibrahim. 'Why not send a message to His Majesty?'

‘A truce to your counsels,’ said Salim impatiently. ‘Does not His Majesty already know that I love her. No, it is no use writing: order my forces to march on Agra. I will snatch her from my enemies and settle down in the Punjab as an independent king. I can no longer endure to be under my father’s rule.’

‘Your Highness will only take what is yours by right,’ said a courtier. ‘The Empire will be divided only for a time to be united under you again. Even His Majesty can have no objection to such an arrangement.’

‘I can brook no fetters,’ said the Prince. ‘I have made up my mind to march on Agra at once, and enter it to save my Mihar-ul-Nissa before even my father knows that I am there.’

‘What about Man Singh?’ said Ibrahim. ‘That grim chief may not like to go with us; he is a creature of His Majesty. I think we had better leave him here to kill his own relations and friends: the infidels will wield for us the sword of Islam. It is no use stopping here without mirth, maidens, and music.’

‘You talk lightly,’ replied Salim, ‘when my heart is full of anguish. What tortures my beloved may this moment be enduring! Order horses at once.’

‘But what about Man Singh?’ suggested Ibrahim again.

‘Summon him hither,’ said Salim.

‘My Prince,’ said Ibrahim, ‘it may be disastrous to our plans.’

‘To the devil with danger, thy plan and thyself. I must and will act as becomes my position.’

Raja Man Singh was called in and came agreeably to the summons of the Prince.

The Prince rose and received the Raja with great courtesy. ‘I gave you this trouble,’ he said with the dignified politeness which he knew so well how to assume, ‘to thank you for yesterday’s victory and ask you to carry your conquest home. I think it is of no use my staying here now, you are more than a match for the valiant Rana.’

‘My lord,’ said the Raja, who had already been informed of the plans of the Prince, ‘it will not be possible for me to carry on the operations against the Rana in Your Highness’s absence, and then His Majesty . . .’

‘This is my wish,’ interrupted the Prince. ‘I am not going to stay here even half an hour more. You can stay and do the bidding of your king. I am my own master.’

‘Your Highness can act as it pleases Your Highness,’ said Raja Man Singh, ‘yet I would Your Highness asked His Majesty’s permission for this journey. There will be much displeasure.’

‘Mean you displeasure against yourself or against me?’ asked Salim.

‘Your Highness no doubt is the best judge of the situation, but complications may arise and I

only entreat Your Highness to reconsider the matter.'

'Of my own interests I am the best judge,' interposed Salim, 'and now salaams and farewell.'

Raja Man Singh thus dismissed, slowly retired and entered his tent.

'Suruj Singh,' he said to his nephew, 'I am on the horns of a dilemma and know not how to act. The Prince thinks of marching back on Agra and wants me to stay here. From what I have been able to gather, he is mad after Mihar-ul-Nissa and is returning to Agra as a rebel.'

'Why not put him under restraint at once,' suggested Suruj Singh, 'and take him to His Majesty?'

'Slowly, my son,' said Raja Man Singh. 'The Prince has an army under him, and it will never please His Majesty if we kill our own men. His Majesty has often said that for the conquest of a rebel, one's own patience and love are the strongest weapons.'

'You know best what to do,' said Suruj Singh. 'I am a simple soldier and know that we must act, and at once.'

'I think my best plan is to inform His Majesty,' said Raja Man Singh, 'and wait for orders. Abul Fazal is returning from the Deccan and his advice will be invaluable when he comes.'

Raja Man Singh at once sent a messenger to the Court, ordered the troops under his command

to advance, thus taking with him the major portion of the army, and the Prince with such forces as were under his own command started for Agra.

Arriving at Agra the Prince found the gates barred and the ramparts manned. He bade his trumpeters advance with one of his captains and imperiously demand admittance.

‘His Majesty has gone to Lahore and we have orders,’ replied Quilij Khan, the chief of the town guard, ‘to admit no one who bears flags, arms, or trumpets. Let the Prince dismiss his train and he is doubly welcome.’

‘Whose are these insolent mandates?’ asked the captain.

‘Mine,’ boldly replied Quilij Khan.

The captain returned to the Prince with the tidings. The rage of the Prince was indescribable.

‘Go back,’ he cried, as soon as he could speak, ‘and say that if the gates are not opened to me and mine the blood of the arrogant chief will be on his own head.’

The envoy delivered the message but received only a stern reply. The Prince trembling with fury directed his followers to break open the gates. His forces advanced to the attack, but their valour was of no avail against the fire of the guns from the ramparts, and they fell back in great confusion.

With feelings of dismay the Prince watched the defeat of his army, and called a hasty council at

which various and contradictory opinions were loudly urged, some for marching on to Lahore, others for dispersing and entering the town peaceably, and then uniting and taking it.

‘I am not a thief to enter the town stealthily,’ cried Salim greatly incensed. ‘When we cannot take a single town, it is useless to march on the Punjab. I must be near Agra to rescue my Mihar-ul-Nissa.’

‘Sir,’ said a man coming up, ‘I entered the city as directed, and I am sorry to inform your Highness that Mihar-ul-Nissa has been married to Ali Kuli Beg.’

‘Married!’ exclaimed Prince Salim. ‘Did not she protest? Did not she kill him or herself?’

‘I heard of no such thing,’ said the man. ‘Your Highness, she is now living with her husband.’

‘Who can trust women?’ said Salim. ‘Their words mean nothing. Frailty is their nature and they deserve no more consideration than a plaything.’

‘Your Highness is quite right,’ said Ibrahim. ‘It is no use now taking Agra. Let us retire and beguile the time.’

‘We may as well go to Allahabad,’ said the Prince.

‘A message from the Empress,’ said a page, coming forward.

‘What have you to say?’ angrily asked the Prince.

‘Miriam Makani, Your Highness’s grandmother, has sent me to say to Your Highness that she is surprised at your passing near her mansion and failing to visit her, but Her Majesty is herself now coming to lighten her eyes by the sight of Your Highness.’

‘She wants to influence me,’ exclaimed the Prince. ‘No, I will not see her. Let us go to Allahabad.’

The page returned to Empress Miriam Makani with the Prince’s decision, and much disappointed she departed.

The Prince and his party got into boats and sailed for Allahabad. Arriving there, he entered the fort, took possession of the treasure, and struck coin in his own name.

Akbar received information of every movement of the Prince, but he waited patiently, wishing to conquer his rebellious son by love. He ignored everything, and, a few days after the Prince had taken his abode at Allahabad, conferring on him the government of Bengal, asked him to repair to the court.

In the meanwhile he sent for his friend Abul Fazal, who was coming from the Deccan, hoping that his sweet words would win back the Prince to the path of obedience and love.

The Prince, to drown his grief and disappointment, had given himself up to dissipation and drink, but when His Majesty’s message arrived

giving him a province to rule, instead of reproving him for his wanton actions, he was more than pleased and eager to make peace. So he sent a cunning letter asserting his innocence, and declaring his intention of repairing to the court at an early date.

Akbar could be firm as well as loving, and would not accept his statement, but sent word that if he was in earnest in his wish to pay his respects to His Majesty, he ought to prove his confidence by repairing to the court alone, dismissing his adherents to their homes and jagirs.

The Prince was afraid to disobey. His boon companions were eager to return to their homes, so very shortly he left Allahabad to pay homage to his father and beg his forgiveness. He had only gone a stage from Allahabad, when he was informed that Abul Fazal was coming from the Deccan to join the court.

For some time the Prince appeared silent and moody, nor did his companions disturb him in his reflections. He raised his head at length and said, 'My father loves a joke, and he will take this frolic of mine no more seriously than it deserves. A fit of youthful folly with which he will deal as he has with others, but Abul Fazal will contrive to turn it into a crime, argue connivance a great mistake, forgiveness a weakness, and make reconciliation an impossibility.'

'As for the wrong-headed Abul Fazal,' said

Koka Ibrahim, 'why should he be allowed to spoil everything by his oily sophistries?'

'What do you mean?' inquired Salim.

'I mean that he should never be allowed to join the court, but be sent on a journey to heaven. He is always talking of the transitoriness of earth and its pleasures, and says that a philosopher is a man for whom death has no fear. According to his own philosophy we shall be doing him a service by setting him free from the body which he says is a burden to him.'

'Is there any man who will do the deed?' asked Salim. 'The man who helps me now can name his own reward when I ascend the throne.'

'I will,' said Bir Singh Deo, a robber chief who was in the retinue of the Prince. 'I will die or return with the head of your enemy at my saddle-bow.'

'That is bravely said,' quoth the Prince, 'and may God help you in your noble enterprise.'

Bir Singh Deo at once separated from them, and followed the road to the Deccan while the Prince entered Agra and laid his forehead at the feet of his father, who received him kindly and told him jestingly not to be impatient and hasty, since the empire must come to him at no distant date.

Abul Fazal, eager to meet his sovereign and friend, was returning hurriedly with only a few followers. As he was nearing Gwalior, he left his

camp before dawn to enjoy the fresh breeze of the morning. He was riding, lost in thought, when suddenly a party of horsemen attacked him, and pierced him with swords and lances. As he fell on the ground, Bir Singh Deo said mockingly, 'The mighty Lord has courteously sent for you.' The Shaikh proudly turned away his face. Bir Singh promptly cut off his head and putting it in a kerchief, slung it on his saddle-bow and rode away.

When the news reached Agra no one dared to break it to Akbar. At last the agent of Abul Fazal presented himself with a black kerchief round his hands.

'What does this mean?' exclaimed Akbar, when his eyes fell on the agent, 'what has happened to my beloved Shaikh?'

'The wise Shaikh is no more,' said the agent, 'he was waylaid and beheaded at Antri.'

'Waylaid and beheaded!' cried Akbar, heaving a deep sigh and muttering, 'my Shaikh, my Shaikh. Bring me back my Shaikh. If Salim wished to have the empire,' he added in an anguished voice, 'he should have killed me and spared the kind and good Abul Fazal.'

Akbar was deeply grieved, he felt the loss of his friend keenly. It was in the light of Abul Fazal's knowledge that he had found truth and learned to recognise it in every form. It was his just policy which had given strength and solidarity

to his empire, and now they had brought his headless body to the court.

Akbar rose to receive the body of his friend with tears flowing from his eyes, and said, 'When my Shaikh, eager to meet me, turned towards my court, in his eagerness to waste no time, he came without head or dress.'

The Emperor ordered the whole court to go into mourning and shut himself up in his palace. For days he would neither see nor speak to any one. He also was approaching the time when he had to lay down his body, and was not able to avenge the murder of his best beloved friend.

CHAPTER XIV

AFTER the death of Abul Fazal, Akbar was never his old self again, his strength slowly declined, till he could not rise from his bed. He, who found excitement in controlling mad elephants and leading great armies, now lay helplessly on his bed in the large upper chamber, looking to the rising sun, a solitary and pathetic figure. Of those who once surrounded his throne, almost all had already passed into the darkness of death. Todar Mal the great financier, Faizi the charming bul-bul, the gay and quick witted Bir Bal, and the learned Abul Fazal; all who shared and stimulated his aspirations and triumphs had left him one after another.

Younger generations had risen whom he knew not. What had time spared him but the hope for the continuance of his work, the peace and order which he had established, the unity of action and aspiration which he had inaugurated, the awakening of the national feeling which he had engendered ?

But even the lofty dream upon which the best part of his life had been spent seemed to be dis-

solving. Salim was already pledged to a reactionary movement. He knew very well that Salim as an Emperor would not be very different from Salim as a prince.

How he wished and prayed that God might change his ways and enable him to gird himself up for his arduous duties. There was, of course, Khusru, the son of Salim, who attended his grandfather with untiring devotion, but would Salim consent to his ascending the throne? If not, it might lead to civil and internecine feuds, resulting in chaos, which Akbar thought he had once for all conquered. Thoughts such as these haunted the dying sovereign as he tossed upon his bed, thinking always of the well-being of his people.

There still remained to him a few trusty friends. Hakim Ali, his physician, Aziz Khoka, his foster brother, Raja Man Singh bound to him by marriage ties, and long and loyal service, and Kader Jehan Mufti, the jovial comrade of many a happy day. Akbar knew that his last wishes would be carried out by his friends, even if they sacrificed their lives in the attempt.

Outside the palace ebbed and flowed a crowd, tense with mingled curiosity and sympathy, while the excitement in the other rooms of the palace was growing.

A certain grandeur overspread the moving scene as every one talked reverently of the King. Men and women of every communion offered up earnest

prayers for Akbar's recovery, as tears trickled down their cheeks and choked with emotion, they asked for news at the palace gate.

'May God preserve him,' said a devout Hindu. 'May he ever live to look after us, his children. He awakened all ambitions, rewarded all merits, and enlarged the borders of glory.'

'He is an avatar' (an incarnation of deity), added another. 'He is a father to his people, forgiving like a God, and loving like a mother.'

'I would give my life to save his,' added another, 'but alas, death accepts no substitute.'

'Alas, the drunkard Prince will now ascend the throne,' said a passer-by, 'and afflict the land with his licentiousness.'

'He may yet change and follow in the footsteps of his father,' added another. 'He can be a very good man when he wishes.'

'Would he wish it, would he change pleasure for toil?' said the first spokesman. 'Would his companions allow him to think of anything higher?'

'God, who watches the destinies of nations,' said the passer-by, 'would give him strength to break the fetters which hold him and awaken him to his duty.'

'Pardon me,' said the second spokesman, 'but the ways of God are wonderful. There does not seem to be any continuity in His actions, otherwise we would never have a drunkard for a king.'

‘We transgress His laws,’ said the devout Hindu, ‘and blame God for the fruit of our actions. He sent us divine rulers, but alas, we failed to observe the laws which they laid for us and now we must learn through suffering.’

‘I cannot follow your reasoning,’ said the unbeliever. ‘Look at Akbar. He comes, he finds the country in a chaos of ignorance, superstition, and misrule, slowly he evolves order, and works for the well-being of the country, and now all of a sudden it seems as if this grand structure was built on a foundation of sand, to vanish into thin air like an empty bubble on the stream of time, when the magician who raised it withdraws his magic wand.’

‘He came to show the way,’ said the second speaker; ‘but the world is not yet with him, and though with his death the visible structure of his work may disappear, his influence will endure for ever.’

While the crowd before the gate were praying and chatting, Prince Salim in his apartments in the palace was anxiously awaiting the happy news—the news of his loving father’s death.

‘We shall know in a minute,’ the Prince was saying with evident joy. ‘I sent Khaja Sharif to glean the news, he is the only person about the sick room in whom I have confidence.’

‘There he comes,’ said a companion, ‘and see how rapidly he walks. I congratulate

Your Majesty. He surely brings some happy tidings.'

'It will be a real misfortune if he rallies now,' said Salim, his heart beating violently under his close-fitting garment. 'My old father has a constitution like iron, and may yet recover. My unhappy son Khusru seems to be his favourite. I hope he will not give him the throne. I am in frightful anguish.'

'How can he give what is yours by right,' said several courtiers. 'Even if he does so, we will take prompt action and triumph.'

'I am ready to do anything,' exclaimed Salim. 'I will not allow the youthful and unthinking boy to consummate the ruin of true religion by his foolish actions.'

'Your Highness shall be the preserver of the true religion,' cried his companion. 'The Emperor has never nominated Prince Khusru as your successor. Was not the omen itself in your favour when your elephant defeated his elephant in the very presence of His Majesty?'

'His Majesty was a little annoyed at the success of mine,' said the Prince, 'but even then he said all elephants will soon be mine.'

In the meantime the Khaja, perceiving the Prince waiting for him, threw aside his dignity, and broke into a run, and plunging into the doorway below, he climbed the stairs with great rapidity, and rushing breathlessly through the

ante-chamber, entered the apartments of the Prince.

‘We shall know now, we shall know now,’ cried Prince Salim, as the secretary rushed into the room. A storm of questions and exclamations raised quite a hubbub over the news which the messenger was delivering.

‘His Majesty passed a bad night,’ he was saying, ‘he could scarcely sleep, he may pass away any moment. Hakim Ali holds out no hopes.’

‘The Hakims never know,’ said Prince Salim. ‘This suspense is unendurable.’

‘He cannot live long,’ the messenger added, ‘he is getting weaker and weaker and is in a half unconscious state.’

‘Is it so?’ said the Prince, ‘then we must prepare for action. Let our faithful followers scatter about the palace to take and close it at once when the blessed moment arrives.’

‘It cannot be far off,’ said the messenger. ‘The throne awaits Your Majesty.’

‘I will fill your mouth with sugar and load you with rewards if your words come true,’ said Prince Salim. ‘My father has had his day, and has no right to linger on and keep me waiting.’

A mournful and oppressive silence reigned in the room where Akbar lay dying. The bright winter sun filled it with delightful warmth and radiance, enfolding its votary in its bright rays. Man Singh and Mirza Aziz talked aside in muffled

tones, while Hakim Ali sat beside the bed of the Emperor mixing up powerful potions, in the vain hope of affecting the impossible, and curing the Emperor.

Akbar seemed to be in deep slumber, and his chest rose but faintly in response to his breathing : his spirit seemed already withdrawing itself and keeping a weakening contact with the body.

‘Brother,’ said Khan Azim, turning to Man Singh, ‘His Majesty cannot live long. God knows what may be in store for us. Would to heaven we had quitted this earth before him, like so many of his devoted friends.’

‘Destiny has preserved us for some uncommon end,’ added Man Singh, mournfully. ‘The habits and ways of Prince Salim are well known, and unless he changes greatly, our career has come to a close.’

‘How I wish we could quietly retire,’ murmured Khan Azim, ‘and pass our days at home in peace and prepare ourselves for the future.’

‘How can we leave Sultan Khusru in the hands of his enemies,’ said Raja Man Singh.

‘True,’ said Khan Azim, ‘he is a promising Prince and would be a worthy successor of our beloved Emperor. I wish we could help him to the throne.’

‘I am willing to do my best for Sultan Khusru,’ said Raja Man Singh. ‘As for Salim, even His Majesty does not like the idea of his succeeding

him, and except a set of libertines, Salim has no following.'

'We can easily manage to secure the throne for Prince Khusru,' said Khan Azim. 'We can at once put Salim under restraint and declare Sultan Khusru, his son, as Emperor.'

'I think we cannot carry it out as easily as you suppose,' said Raja Man Singh. 'Our action might lead to a great deal of bloodshed, and eventually end in the misrule and anarchy which we wish to avoid. It is true that Prince Salim has no following, but let me assure you that all the turbulent spirits, the fanatic Mahomedans and others, are sure to flock to his standard.'

'Of course that has to be reckoned with,' replied Khan Azim, 'but if by a bold coup, we can promptly arrest Prince Salim, we may be able to quench the spark before it bursts into a general insurrection. It will be a melancholy thing if the reign of our good and mighty Akbar closes in bloodshed.'

Hakim Ali had administered some medicine which seemed to revive the dying Akbar. He opened his eyes and beckoned Khan Azim and Man Singh to approach, and then said in a firm though feeble voice: 'Friends, the words that passed between you both have reached my ears: for days and days lying on this bed I have been thinking of the same things, and I at last am prepared to leave my work in His Hands whose

instruments we are. He can use His tools as He wishes, it is useless to think of that which is not in our hands. Do you the same. Salim is my rightful successor and you, too, must acknowledge him your sovereign. Fain would I set beloved Khusru on the throne, but I do not wish to set a father and son fighting. Call in Prince Salim, all the chiefs, and all the dignitaries, that I may see them before I close my eyes for ever.'

'Your commands shall be obeyed,' said Man Singh, as tears trickled down his wrinkled cheeks. 'How shall we live among new men, strange faces, and a new world?'

'Friend,' said Akbar, drawing a stronger breath, 'comfort yourself. We have lived and done our work, and He will do what is best.'

Man Singh and Khan Azim, unable to control themselves, burst into tears, while Akbar looked at them with infinite love and compassion.

Prince Salim and Sultan Khusru, with the chief dignitaries of the State, were sent for and came with alacrity and respectfully entered the room. Akbar once more opened his eyes and signed to Man Singh to invest Prince Salim with his own turban and robes of state, and to gird him with his own sword. Then Akbar made a sign as if bowing his head before his successor, at this all the dignitaries saluted the Prince and acknowledged him as their Sovereign.

Akbar then closed his eyes, his heart put forth

its last convulsive effort, and ceased to beat, leaving a peaceful smile on the face which would smile no more. Nature outside—wood and wide lawn and cloudless far-off sky—shone at her fairest as if offering a welcome to the soul of the departed monarch.

Salim hurried out of the room, while Man Singh and Khan Azim remained beside the bed, their hearts full of deep emotion and tears streaming on their withered cheeks, quite forgetful of the bustle which went on around them.

The gate of the seraglio opened and there poured into the room a crowd of ladies—wives and servants of the dead monarch—their hair dishevelled, their garments torn, rending the skies with their cries and lamentations. Amongst them walked Jodha Bai, the Rajput wife of Akbar. She stood at the head of the bed and looked with inexpressible love at the body of her husband, and exclaimed in a strange unearthly voice, ‘My Sovereign, my Lord, my Emperor, you cannot leave me alone; we part not like this. If you have left the body, I will follow you and we shall never part for ever and for ever! I cannot linger here without you! I hear you calling! I am coming, I am coming!’ and then she ran out of the room to her own apartment.

‘Bring me my jewels, my ornaments,’ she said impatiently to her maids. ‘Bring out my richest robes. This is my last wedding day. Prepare

the pyre that there may be no delay. I am already with my beloved under the bridal canopy. Hasten, girls, hasten, be not so lazy in doing me this last service.'

She took her bath in the holy waters of the Ganges, dressed herself like a bride, and, with a smile upon her lips mounted the sandalwood pile, which the maids had prepared for her, with Akbar's sword in her lap. 'I am with you,' she cried exultingly, and without a sign of anguish or pain, fell dead. A flame lit up the pile as if put there by invisible hands, and her body was soon consumed and restored to its elements. The maids wept and showered flowers on the burning embers.

In the meantime the body of Akbar lay solitary in his chamber. Two or three Moulvies recited the Quran beside it, while the courtiers and others were busy in trying to win favour with the new Emperor. Those on whom Akbar's bounty had heaped every luxury, now crowded round the newly organised court of Salim, who, after a weary waiting, was happy to be on the throne.

A number of servants bathed Akbar's body in perfumed waters, wrapped it in a white sheet, covered it with a costly shawl, and carried it out of the Ninety-Nine Gates of the Palace to the Bihisht Bagh (Garden of Paradise) at Sekandra, some six miles from Agra, where Akbar had built his own mausoleum, and as they bore him to it a great crowd poured in from all directions, drawn

from all ranks of society, from all castes and creeds, to follow the sacred remains of their good Emperor.

Arriving at Bihisht Bagh they laid his body in the tomb with his face towards the rising sun—the beautiful white marble mausoleum, with its minarets gleaming, and surrounded by a beautiful garden with an amazing wealth of graceful trees and profusion of sweet scented flowers, fountains and murmuring waterfalls, girded by a red stone wall which separated it from the outer world, where even the restless air seemed to pause, gathering perfume.

The Hindus performed their own burial ceremony and recited their hymns of the dead while the Mahomedans offered up their prayers. A Maulvi and a Pandit took their stations near the tomb when all retired, and even now their descendants, a Hindu and a Mahomedan, guard the tomb of Akbar, who followed the divine religion, which was, is, and for ever shall be, the real source of life of all the creeds and sects.

CHAPTER XV

THE news of Akbar's death spread like wildfire all over the country. The peasant stopped his plough, the Bunnia closed his shop, the village people gathered in groups and talked mournfully of the sad event under the village trees, and sat with drooping heads and moist eyes as if they had lost in him a father.

'Akbar treated his people as if they were his own children,' said an old farmer. 'He guaranteed us peace and justice, equitable rents, and gave us food when our fields failed to produce grain.'

'In the great famine that came over us three years ago,' said another farmer, 'he opened his granaries to save us from dying of starvation.'

'What is a king,' said a Brahmin, 'but a father and a protector of his people? Akbar only did his duty in helping his people.'

'Leaving aside the question of deeds, how many kings even know their duty?' remarked an old man. 'I have seen many kings reign and pass out into the gloom of the grave. I remember the day when a Hindu was treated like a dog, when

every collector of Poll Tax could inflict untold misery on Hindus, when even a peon thought it below his dignity to walk on foot, and impressed four men from the villages he passed through to carry him on their shoulders on a charpoy, when any petty official could tyrannise over the poor. Akbar was more than a king. He acted like a God in recognising the equality of all his subjects irrespective of caste, creed, or nationality, a thing never known in India before.'

'Unfortunately report does not speak well of Prince Salim,' sighed another peasant, 'and he may upset everything.'

'God will give him strength to rise equal to his responsibilities,' said the old man. 'He can make millions of people happy or leave them to the tender mercies of his heartless officials.'

'God knows what is in store for us,' muttered many voices. 'This respite of peace and happiness will make a change to old conditions all the more painful. Happy are they who have their own rulers.'

'We reap the fruit of our past actions,' said the Brahmin, 'and grumbling can do no good.'

'What cannot be cured must be endured,' cried several voices, 'but it makes us unhappy to think of good King Akbar's death.'

'The death of Akbar has given us more pain than the death of our own kith and kin,' said some; 'but we must submit to His divine will. Our

Pandit must offer prayers for the dead and we will pay him. May peace be his.'

'My son,' said a wily old Bunnia to his son, 'we must bury all our money and put on dirty clothes. The times have changed and we do not know what may come. Torment us as they may, we should never tell them of our buried treasures.'

'Father,' said the young man as he shook his oily locks and put a scented kerchief to his nose, 'you have grown old and seem to have lost your senses. How can I put on dirty clothes?'

'Child,' replied the old man, his hand trembling, 'you will be the ruin of us all. That new room of yours—I wish I could raze it to the ground—will procure unimaginable torments for us. You are unreasonable. There will be wars now; the man who ascends the throne will have to march through streams of blood and will sanction rapine to fill the coffers of those who help him. He will want to outshine his predecessor in magnificence. How can he do so without rapine or plunder? They say India is overflowing with gold and silver, jewels and diamonds, because they see such a display in grand Durbars and do not see millions of people who never have even one good meal in a day.'

'True, father,' said the young man, 'but Akbar was a god, an avatar, and surely his death shall not be crowned with such bloody laurels, he will leave his influence behind.'

'Let us hope so,' said the Bunnia. 'In the

meantime we must take all precautions, so that whatever happens we may keep something to live upon.'

'Of course,' said the young Bunnia, 'we must take all precautions, but I don't see why I should put on dirty clothes.'

'Boy, you are a fool,' said the old man, 'your white clothes will attract official attention, and you do not know what it means; it means complete ruin.'

While people were mourning the loss of their beloved sovereign, Agra was being prepared for great festivities. Prince Salim would not wait even for the completion of funeral ceremonies, and only a few days after the death of his father he placed his foot on the golden steps of the peacock throne, and at the auspicious moment fixed by the court astrologers took his seat on it, amid a deafening salute from hundreds of cannons, as rows of nobles, dignitaries, and courtiers bowed to the ground in obeisance.

A herald stepped forward and proclaimed that Emperor Nur-uddin Jehangir (light of the faith and conqueror of the world) had ascended the throne, and then in a loud, sonorous voice exclaimed, 'When the second Sahib Qiran, the Emperor Jehangir sat on the throne of prosperity as emblem of justice, wealth, victory, and glory girded their loins to serve him and laid their heads in submission at the foot of the throne.'

The herald receded to his place, and all the nobles advanced one by one with valuable presents and laid them at the foot of the throne. When all the nobles, dignitaries, and ambassadors had paid their respects and made their presents to the new Emperor, they were rewarded with costly presents, vast jagirs and valuable robes of honour; then a page brought fruit and sweets on a salver of gold, Jehangir tasted an apple and then distributed the remainder with his own hand to those whom he wished specially to honour. The gift was received with profound bows and great eagerness, as if it was the elixir of life.

Jehangir was now all graciousness, and as his eye wandered over the dazzling crowd and rested on his son, Prince Khusrû, Raja Man Singh, and Khan Azim, his face glowed with satisfaction and pride, and he forgave them and conferred on them governments of Punjab, Bengal and the Deccan respectively. At the end of these ceremonies, at the instance of Jehangir, a herald advanced and began: 'May our Emperor Jehangir be the Emperor of the world. His Majesty has commanded his humble servant to announce that in remembrance of his coronation, one hundred thousand wells will be sunk in his country, fifty thousand rest-houses will be built along the roads for the comfort of travellers, and that no bales of merchandise will be opened for the purpose of octroi charges, and all taxes remitted for six

months. Doctors at His Majesty's expense will be appointed to attend the sick and the poor, the sale of intoxicating liquors stopped, and for six months food will be distributed night and day to all who care to receive it. His Majesty wishes it to be proclaimed that he will always be pleased to do justice to all who are oppressed and have a grievance and who come to his benign gate for redress, and shake, by pulling the string, the cluster of golden bells which shall always be hung outside his apartments. Let us all pray that the sun of glory may shine on His Majesty's reign, and the star of victory spread its light over the whole world.'

The herald withdrew, and a deafening cheer uprose in thankfulness for the boons granted.

Then the Emperor Jehangir stepped down from the throne supported by the new prime minister, Sharif Khan, and slowly walked through the rows of the bowing courtiers, who stood on both sides, to the courtyard where at the foot of the steps of Diwan-i-am a gorgeously caparisoned elephant awaited him. The elephant raised his trunk in salute and sank down on his knees, a golden ladder was placed on one side, and Jehangir mounted it and took his seat on the throne which the elephant carried. All the nobles mounted their elephants and equipages which were in attendance. A procession was formed, which was led by a party of drummers and trumpeters, and a large body of cavalry resplendent in cloth of gold, and in

great splendour proceeded to the royal mosque. As the procession advanced, ministers and courtiers threw gold and silver coins among the thronging populace over the head of the Emperor.

At the outer gate of the mosque the Emperor alighted from his elephant, and, surrounded by all his court, advanced into the inner room where, with great solemnity, the Shaikh-ul-Sadar conducted the prayers and proclaimed Prince Nur-uddin Salim as the Emperor of India, reciting his genealogy and conferring upon him the title of 'the Light of the Faith.' Jehangir made an offering of fifty thousand gold mohurs at the royal mosque, and then surrounded by the same pomp, returned to the palace.

But the ceremonies were not yet over. The evening festival was by far the most sumptuous ever known before, even in Agra. A great feast was laid in Durbar-i-am, which was illumined by thousands of little lights, reflected in the marble columns of the hall like glowing rubies, and which made the gilded and beautifully painted ceiling scintillate as if studded with costly gems. The hall was full to overflowing with great Rajas, ministers, and nobles of the Empire.

England, France, and Persia were represented by their ambassadors, and used though Jehangir was to the grandeur of his father's court, even he could not look at the scene without a sparkling eye and a swelling heart, and began to feel not only

the greatness but the sacred responsibility of his position.

Prince Khusru, Khan Azim, and Man Singh could not afford to be absent, and endured untold miseries as they tried to smile and to appear as if they had never been so happy before.

‘He bears himself bravely,’ said Man Singh to Khan Azim when they were alone. ‘Who knows he may change for the better and prove himself a worthy son of our beloved Akbar.’

‘My heart prays for no greater boon,’ replied Khan Azim, ‘but I fear he will give way soon. The moment he touches a drop of liquor, he will fall back into his old ways again.’

‘We had better wait and bide our time,’ said Man Singh. ‘At the deathbed of Akbar we gave him a promise, and I think we must give Salim a chance.’

‘Wait!’ exclaimed Khan Azim, ‘do you think it would be easy to dethrone him after six months? I think it is already too late.’

‘Perhaps it is,’ said Man Singh, ‘but we must be faithful unto death.’

‘We must,’ said Khan Azim with a sigh, ‘but Agra is not the place for us now. It is far too painful. It reminds me of him who presided in these halls and is now there no more.’

‘I leave Agra to-morrow and perhaps for ever,’ said Man Singh. ‘What a blessing it would have

been if we had left this earth like others in his hands.'

'Fate has reserved us for some cruel end,' said Khan Azim with a sigh. 'I have no faith in the clemency that he has extended us, and now that we have surrendered ourselves into his hands, God knows what we may have to go through.'

'We have had our day,' said Man Singh. 'I desire nothing more than to pass away in peace.'

'May the end of your life be sweet,' said Khan Azim, embracing Man Singh. 'Farewell.'

'Farewell,' said Man Singh with a sob. 'May God protect you.'

Then the two friends parted, never to meet again.

Khan Azim shortly afterwards was accused of treason and flayed alive, and Man Singh ended his days in his own domain.

True to his word, Jehangir now spent greater part of the day in hearing the complaints of the people and dispensing justice, but poor complainants were rarely allowed to approach the string of the bells. One day as he sat calm and self-possessed, totally unlike the gay Prince Salim of old, some one pulled the string and the bells chimed, calling the attention of the Emperor.

'Go and see who has rung the bell,' he said to a minister. 'Let the sufferer be admitted to my presence.'

The minister rose, went out, and after a little while returned with an old man and woman in

rag, who fell prostrate on the ground before Jehangir and cried, 'Justice, justice, mercy, oh! King of Kings, mercy.'

'Calm yourself,' said Jehangir, 'and let me hear of your troubles. I will do you justice.'

'May you live for ever,' said the old man, and then stopped. He mumbled something further but failed to articulate a word.

'Briefly explain the wrong you have suffered,' said a minister. 'His Majesty cannot listen too long to your complaints.'

'How can I say what I have come to say,' said the woman, trembling like a leaf in the wind. 'The man who has wronged me, who has killed the light of my eyes, is too far above me.'

'You will be righted even if the wrong-doer is my son,' said Jehangir, who was very much moved. 'Speak without fear.'

'King of Kings,' said the old woman, the light of revenge in her eyes, 'I come from far-off Burdwan. For months we have walked on foot, begging our food from door to door, in the hope of getting justice at the foot of your throne. We were poor people but we were content, we had all that we desired. We had a home, a small farm and a little son to brighten our little hut—he was so beautiful,' she added with a sob. 'One day, my little one was playing in the street, when noble Saif Ullah rode through the street on an elephant, and trod my child to death. We followed the

elephant and prayed for justice, but received only taunts and jeers from the officials in answer. Angry words rose to my lips, I abused the Governor. He ordered our little property to be confiscated and that we should be driven out of the city.' The woman broke down and fell in a swoon; the old man, a mere skeleton, leaned to help her.

'Who in my empire has dared to do this wrong?' exclaimed Jehangir, deeply touched by the woman's narrative. 'I will see her righted; write the order,' he said, turning to a minister, 'and give these people ten gold mohurs.'

'Your Majesty's orders are on my eyes,' said the minister, as he flung the gold to the old man, who looked at it with amazement and took it with a trembling hand, only after being repeatedly urged. The minister taking his pen and paper waited for the Emperor's orders.

Jehangir dictated, 'Let it be known to Saif Ullah, the Governor of Bengal, that his wanton killing of the child of this old man and his wife, and driving them from their home, deserves degradation and punishment, but for once we are prepared to look over it; and it is our command that the driver be suitably punished, that the home and lands of the complainants be restored to them and an adequate compensation made for the loss they have suffered. These are my commands which must be obeyed.'

The minister read the letter to Jehangir, who affixed his seal to the royal order and handed it over to the old woman who had now recovered, and directed them to carry it to the governor who would right their wrong, and then flung to them a handful of coins to enable them to prosecute their journey with ease and comfort.

The old people hired a cart and in due course reached Burdwan, and sent in the order to the governor. Saif Ullah read the royal firman and worked himself into a rage. He tore it into pieces, and directed his men to take the old couple to prison and keep them there until they confessed their mistake in going to the Emperor, and expressed their submission to his orders.

The old and bereaved parents were confined in a dark and dreary room. Every morning their gaoler came and inquired if they submitted to the order of the all-powerful governor, but they shook their heads in dissent; at last starvation drove them to say they were pleased with the decision of the governor, and they were let out.

They crawled to a village in the neighbourhood where they were nursed and supported by the generosity of the village people. As soon as they could walk, they left the village for Agra again.

They had expressed their intention of going to the Emperor for justice to the village people, and the news found its way in due course to the

governor, but too late for him to get them arrested and brought back, therefore he wrote to his friends at Agra asking them to prevent their seeing the Emperor.

The old people arrived at Agra and found to their utter despair that they were not allowed to approach the string which rang the bell. The fire of revenge burnt in their hearts and would allow them no rest, so that from morning till evening they waited at the palace gate for their opportunity. If the Emperor went for a hunt they followed him at a distance, if he passed through the city they went after him. Months passed without result, but one day Jehangir was taking his pleasure in a barge which was being rowed on the river, his escort waiting for him at the landing. The old man and woman crept through the reeds and bushes and approaching the barge cried, 'Justice, justice, oh, King of Kings.'

Their shrill voices reached Jehangir. He looked on the old couple, and recognising them, ordered the barge to be rowed to them. Having heard their pathetic story, he promised to do them justice, issued a command to the governor to repair to the court, and ordered the old people to be well provided for.

Saif Ullah, not knowing the intentions of the Emperor, which had been revealed to no one, obeyed the imperial command with alacrity, and arriving at Agra encamped with his retinue on

the opposite bank of the river, and sent a message to announce his arrival.

Jehangir gave orders for one of his half mad elephants to be ready by dawn of the day and directed the old people to be present. He was up before sunrise, and crossing the river with the aggrieved parents mounted on the elephant which he had ordered for them. The governor was still asleep when Jehangir reached the camp with a strong force, and ordered Saif Ullah to be bound and thrown before the elephant. His commands were instantly obeyed, and the young governor was trodden to death by the elephant which carried the old people. Jehangir returned home in silence, for Saif Ullah was one of his old companions for whom he had a real regard. He issued orders that Saif Ullah should be buried with fitting pomp and magnificence, and that the whole court should go into mourning for a period of two months.

‘I loved him,’ he said, ‘but justice binds monarchs. A king must do justice at all costs, and every one must receive his due at the foot of the throne.’

CHAPTER XVI

THE throne which Jehangir had so impatiently coveted, which, from a distance, seemed to promise him all the happiness and joy of the earth, was now his own, but no sooner had he taken his seat than it lost all glamour, and its grandeur and glitter brought him no nearer to happiness and joy.

Jehangir found his exalted position full of trouble and anxieties. It took away the freedom of action which he had enjoyed so long, and replaced it by manifold responsibilities.

He had not only to sit on the throne and hold high festivals, but to control and direct turbulent nobles and dignitaries, who only wished for opportunities to create disturbances, so that they might reap the fruit of disorder by looting the people. His own son, Khusru, was already in rebellion, and had to be taught the path of loyalty and obedience.

Jehangir rose equal to the situation, and was not only able to subdue all disturbing forces, but by strenuous administration kept up the reign of justice and peace which his father had established. For two long years he struggled hard against his own nature, quelling the passions which surged

within him, and working hard to do his duty. But even time and a multiplicity of engagements failed to drive the memory of Mihar-ul-Nissa from his mind : it haunted him night and day, so that often, after many weary hours of sleeplessness, he would reproach her for her faithlessness as if she were present. Then even a beggar on the roadside shivering for want of clothes could not have suffered pangs so keen as the proud Mogul Emperor on his pile of velvet cushions. Her sweet mellow voice rang in his ears, her graceful form filled his heart, and he longed to make her his queen and do her bidding as a devoted subject. The more he tried the more he felt his own helplessness, and at last, unable to control himself any longer, he summoned Ali Kuli Beg with a view to persuading him to divorce his wife.

‘ You must have a happy home,’ said Jehangir to him when he came, after talking to him on other things. ‘ I remember having seen your wife as a young girl, and I was struck with her beauty and grace of speech.’

‘ God has blessed me in my wife,’ said Ali Kuli Beg. ‘ She sheds her radiance like the veritable moon on my humble cottage, and her voice fills it with music and her presence makes it paradise for me.’

‘ Ah,’ said Jehangir, a little piqued, ‘ I fear she merely shines from a distance on your house, but is far too high to descend to earth with you.’

‘Pardon me, sire,’ replied Ali Kuli Beg, ‘I have surrendered my soul to her and she has taken her abode in my heart and raised me to her own high sphere.’

‘What do you mean?’ exclaimed Jehangir, unable to control himself. ‘Mihar-ul-Nissa could not have fallen in love with you.’

‘The fire of my love,’ said Ali Kuli Beg, ‘has touched and melted her heart, and made her one with me.’

‘Don’t talk poetry,’ said Jehangir angrily. ‘Do you know that I once loved her and she reciprocated my love?’

‘I know nothing,’ said Ali Kuli Beg haughtily. ‘She is my wife now, and that is enough.’

‘Then I can tell you,’ said Jehangir, ‘that we loved each other, and I wish you to divorce her.’

‘Your Majesty,’ exclaimed Ali Kuli Beg indignantly, ‘she is, and shall be mine whilst this heart beats within my body.’

‘Can nothing induce you to repudiate your marriage?’ anxiously asked Jehangir. ‘It will give me great pleasure if you will do so.’

‘Nothing, Your Majesty,’ was Ali Kuli Beg’s short reply.

‘Even if I myself ask you to do so?’ insisted Jehangir. ‘Think over it a little.’

‘There is nothing to think over,’ answered Ali Kuli Beg. ‘I am ready to march to the gate of death if such is Your Majesty’s command. I have

sold my life but not my honour. Your Majesty can guess what would have been the result if any one but Your Majesty had made such a suggestion.'

'You can go now,' said Jehangir abruptly, 'I have some business of importance to attend to.'

Ali Kuli Beg made the usual salutations and left the royal apartments, the great folding doors closing behind him.

As soon as Ali Kuli Beg was gone Jehangir rose from his chair impatient at the refusal of Ali Kuli Beg to comply with his wishes. He walked to and fro working himself into a rage, and at last distracted by passion muttered, 'I shall win her at all risks. She confessed her love to me and shall be mine. The arrogant Persian must pay with his blood for the insult he has offered me. Mihar-ul-Nissa can never love this rough soldier. She is fit to adorn a throne and must be my queen. A thousand curses on this throne and imperial policies which have kept me inactive so long, but now I will brook no delay.' So saying he stepped up to his chair and rang a silver bell which lay on an ebony table. Nazir Ahmed, his private secretary and friend, answered the summons.

'My faithful friend,' said Jehangir, 'I wish to consult you on a matter of the greatest importance to my happiness.'

'Your Majesty honours me,' said Nazir Ahmed, bowing respectfully. 'I need hardly assure Your Majesty that my life is at your command.'

‘My friend,’ said Jehangir, ‘you have a rare opportunity of serving me, and I shall never forget it if you are successful in the mission which I am about to entrust to you.’

‘Your slave waits for Your Majesty’s commands,’ said Nazir Ahmed, ‘and shall know no rest, taste no food or water till the work entrusted to him is done.’

‘I know I can rely on you,’ said Jehangir. ‘Now listen, the matter is very delicate and requires very careful handling. You know, I think all the world knows, that I loved Mihar-ul-Nissa, and she is now the wife of Ali Kuli Beg. All these months I have longed and pined for her. Only a little while ago I asked Ali Kuli Beg to divorce her in my favour, but he refused.’

‘Refused!’ said Nazir Ahmed.

‘Refused,’ repeated Jehangir.

‘I am grateful for the trust reposed in me,’ said Nizar Ahmed. ‘What rival need a monarch dread. A word from Your Majesty is enough to crush the man. . . .’

‘True,’ said Jehangir, ‘but I am reluctant to mark the beginning of my reign with bloodshed and crime, yet I cannot allow Ali Kuli Beg to stand in the way of my happiness. His loyal services are in his favour, but then I gave him a chance which he has forfeited by his arrogance. Of course you must understand that his death must be accidental and arranged in such a way as to excite no suspicion of any kind.’

‘Your Majesty can leave it to me to devise a fitting plan,’ said Nazir Ahmed. ‘I will not touch food till I have performed the task imposed on so humble a servant by Your Majesty.’

‘He cannot have left the palace grounds as yet,’ replied Jehangir, ‘he was here only a few minutes ago, and must be in the vicinity of the palace. But take care that no open deed of violence is done. He must simply cease to breathe, and some accident must be the cause of it.’

‘Your Majesty’s orders shall be obeyed,’ said Nazir Ahmed, with a smile. ‘An idea has just occurred to me, and the insolent Persian shall be crushed to death by a mad elephant.’

‘Not a bad idea,’ said Jehangir. ‘I give you credit for its ingeniousness.’

‘Your Majesty is kind to me,’ said Nazir Ahmed bowing, ‘my only ambition is to end my life in the service of Your Majesty, and now I go to do the work which Your Majesty has done me the honour to confide in me,’ and making a profound bow he departed.

Nazir Ahmed learned from the gate-keepers that Ali Kuli Beg had walked out of the palace greatly excited, and gone straight to his home in a palanquin, a little while before.

He decided to act at once and ordered one of the half-mad fighting elephants, and mounting it took the same road which Ali Kuli Beg had taken, hoping to come up with him.

Meanwhile Ali Kuli Beg was being slowly carried in a palanquin through the crowded streets of the city to his home. He was greatly excited at what Jehangir had said to him, but determined to risk all his wealth, rank, and position for his beloved, nay, even his life, if necessary, to save the glory of her good name. A thousand thoughts were passing through his mind; but he had married Mihar-ul-Nissa knowing that the Prince loved her, and even now he was not afraid. He proudly twirled his moustache, relying on his own brave heart to defy the power of an Emperor.

He was passing through a narrow street, when he heard the heavy and rapid tramp of an elephant coming from behind. There was nothing unusual in this to excite his attention, elephants passed and repassed through the streets almost the whole day, so Ali Kuli Beg paid no heed, until suddenly the bearers dropped the palanquin and ran away, and looking for the cause he saw an elephant rushing straight towards him. A minute more and he would have been a dead man, but with the rapidity of lightning he jumped out of the palanquin and out of the elephant's path. In a moment the palanquin was crushed to bits as if it were a card-board box, and then the elephant turned towards him. Ali Kuli Beg bravely stood his ground. In a moment the elephant was upon him : Ali Kuli Beg stepped a little aside, then his

sword flashed, and striking the trunk of the elephant passed through it as if it were a delicate cucumber. The elephant at first recoiled and then rushed up again furiously, but there stood Ali Kuli Beg as if made of stone, his javelin in his hand. He poised it and drove it at the head of the furious animal. A stream of blood flowed out from the wound as the elephant turned away and fled. Ali Kuli Beg deliberately wiped his sword, placed it in its scabbard, and then walked home as if nothing of any importance had happened.

‘What means this blood on your garment?’ asked Mihar-ul-Nissa, anxiously. ‘Tell me what has occurred.’

‘Nothing, beloved,’ answered Ali Kuli Beg. ‘A mad elephant broke loose and came upon me, and I had to drive it back.’

‘May God be praised,’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa. ‘I will feed a thousand beggars to thank God for saving your life.’

‘Would it matter much to you if I were to die?’ asked Ali Kuli Beg with a sigh, ‘you would soon get a more ardent lover.’

‘For once you are cruel,’ replied Mihar-ul-Nissa, ‘to ask me such a question. Tell me what troubles you that I may soothe and comfort you.’

‘What troubles me, you ask?’ broke out her husband. ‘If I could bare my bosom to you you would see a strange sight. Jehangir asked me to-day to divorce you. He seems to think of you

still. Do you also wish to fly back to his arms ? Answer me truthfully.'

'Why do you ask me ?' said Mihar-ul-Nissa as she coloured. 'You know I loved the Prince, and waited for him for months. To me those days seemed to lengthen into centuries, but he never cared to redeem his promise, never tried to know how I fared. You were kind and indulgent when I deserved your hate. You conquered me by your love, and now I am yours till death.'

'Soul of my soul,' said Ali Kuli Beg, taking his wife in his arms, 'you have given me new life and may God bless you. Now even God cannot separate us. I do not think Jehangir is serious. I think it was to satisfy an idle curiosity about you that he asked me those useless questions to-day. He seems to have entirely changed since he ascended the throne, and is zealous in dispensing even-handed justice.'

'We have not much to fear,' said Mihar-ul-Nissa. 'But, dear husband, be on your guard lest mere jealousy should drive him to take cruel measures. The idea of having a rival who defied him may set him to assert his own powers.'

'You have given me strength,' said Ali Kuli Beg ; 'your love would protect me and bring me unscathed through flaming fire. Even if there were ranged against me a hundred men, you would see how your love could cut through them all to fly to the bosom of his beloved.'

‘I know no one can stand against you in open fight,’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa, kissing the rough cheek of her gallant husband, ‘but I must warn you against treachery.’

‘No, dear, no,’ said Ali Kuli Beg, ‘do not fear. Let us believe in the goodness of things and rest assured that dark plots cannot injure us. Those schemes will find their grave in the gloom which gives them birth. A foe who cannot come face to face is too contemptible a being to be thought of.’

‘May God have mercy on me and protect you,’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa, ‘He is the only protector of the poor and helpless.’

While husband and wife were thus chatting together, Jehangir was impatiently walking in his apartments, waiting for Nazir Ahmed to report the success of his scheme. Now that he had made up his mind to have Mihar-ul-Nissa at all costs, he could brook no delay. Many a time he looked from the balcony of his apartments for Nazir Ahmed, and as hour after hour flew by without any sign of him he called in his page and sent him to bring Nazir Ahmed to him.

‘What does this delay mean?’ he asked when Nazir Ahmed entered, ‘what has happened to make you so late? The expression of your face shows that you have failed.’

‘Sire,’ said Nazir Ahmed, ‘I did not wish to come into your Majesty’s presence until I had

accomplished the work which Your Majesty bade me do.'

'I am glad you have not been idling,' remarked Jehangir, 'and I cannot rest till she is with me again. I hope you will not waste much time over it.'

'Can Your Majesty's slave find rest until he has fulfilled his mission?' said Mirza Nazir Ahmed. 'I have already commenced operations. An elephant ran amock, attacked Ali Kuli Beg, but the gallant soldier met it with dauntless courage, and wounding its trunk with his sword frightened it away.'

'I am glad you have begun work,' replied Jehangir. 'You need not be discouraged, and I am sure you will hit upon some equally good plan, and be more successful.'

'There is nothing which the splendour of Your Majesty's lucky star cannot accomplish,' said Nazir Ahmed; 'as to this little affair there is nothing to demand even a serious thought.'

'Nazir Ahmed,' said Jehangir, 'the pent-up passion of years seems to have burst into flame and is now consuming me. I have no desire to injure Ali Kuli Beg. He is a brave man and I like him, but I must have my beloved. I am prepared to stake everything for her, my name, honour, and reputation. The peacock throne without her seems to me now like a bed of thorns.'

'Your Majesty shall not have to wait very long,'

said Nazir Ahmed, 'but of course a thing like this cannot be arranged in a day. The star of Khatun Mihar-ul-Nissa seems to me to be in the ascendant.'

'She is the incarnation of beauty,' exclaimed Jehangir. 'All I wish for, all that I long for, is to live in the light and fragrance of her presence, and that the star of her glory may shine upon me for ever.'

'It shall be as Your Majesty wishes,' said Nazir Ahmed. 'Who can disobey your divine command?'

'I spoke plainly enough to that foolish Persian,' said Jehangir, 'but he is very pig-headed and did not seem to understand me and talked of his honour.'

'Sire,' exclaimed Nazir Ahmed, 'I would like to ask him whence came all the honour and dignity of which he is so proud. I remember when he entered the army a penniless wanderer.'

'He seems to have forgotten those days,' remarked Jehangir, 'and refuses to listen to me, and now there remain but two alternatives.'

'What are they? Can I have the honour of knowing?' asked Ahmed, seeing that His Majesty hesitated to proceed further.

'Listen and mark me,' replied Jehangir, in a confidential tone. 'Mihar-ul-Nissa must be mine at all costs. That rude Persian lied when he said that he had won her love. Did she not spurn him on the very day of her marriage? How can she

love him ? Being married to him she cannot but tolerate his presence.'

'In fact, Your Majesty,' interposed Nazir Ahmed, 'as I know, for a very long time, she refused to see him, but when Your Majesty, occupied by affairs of state, seemed to forget her what could she do ? But the day she learns Your Majesty loves her still, she will fly to Your Majesty like a bird of paradise.'

'I only came to know these details a few days ago,' said Jehangir, 'and that is why I am anxious to give Ali Kuli Beg another chance. I should be very pleased if he could be persuaded to divorce her; I am very reluctant to take any extreme measures. Your recompense and reward will be all the greater if you can arrange it amicably, but if he fails to listen to you, you have complete freedom of action, and I trust you will not waste time uselessly, as I cannot endure her absence now.'

'It will be useless for me to attempt to persuade Ali Kuli Beg,' said Nazir Ahmed, 'he is not likely to listen to me. But Your Majesty's orders are on my eyes and I will speak to him once more; if he refuses, he will have no one but himself to blame for his folly.'

'I leave the whole thing to you,' said Jehangir, 'and you must act in such a manner as to excite no suspicion if you are forced to take extreme measures.'

‘ I will do my best to merit the trust which Your Majesty has put in me,’ said Nazir Ahmed.

‘ Very well, you can go now,’ said Jehangir. ‘ I shall wait impatiently for your return.’

‘ I will not return unsuccessful,’ said Nazir Ahmed, making a profound bow as he retreated from the royal presence without turning his back.

CHAPTER XVII

NAZIR AHMED was in high spirits as he left the palace grounds; with his head thrown back and chest prominent, he walked like a proud peacock in love time, and dreamed of high rank and great reward as he triumphantly twirled his waxed moustache and planned the death of a noble soldier. 'Shaikh Nazir Ahmed,' he murmured to himself, 'you are a wonderful man. From being a common thief to being the confidant of a king you have accomplished by your own unaided efforts, and now everything must develop to your advantage. There is ample scope for the employment of your ingenuity, and unless the wild Persian pays a handsome ransom and surrenders his wife to the king he must pay with his life.'

Thus musing he entered the town, passed through many dark and intricate lanes, and at last, reaching a house of a miserable appearance he tapped at the door three times. After some delay it was opened by an old woman who carefully scanned his face and admitted him, closing the door behind him. He walked into a long, low

apartment where sat some forty persons drinking country liquor from earthen jars.

‘You here?’ they all exclaimed, as they rose to greet him. ‘We thought you had become a servant of the King.’

‘What news?’ asked a rough-looking man. ‘Can we help you in easing your royal master of his treasures?’

‘Good news,’ said Nazir Ahmed. ‘You can serve His Majesty the Emperor and reap ample rewards.’

‘Serve His Majesty!’ broke out many voices. ‘Do we not always co-operate with His Majesty’s officers in levying a tax on those who live on others and have not the privilege to be helped out of their wealth by His Majesty’s governors?’

‘Ours is a brave profession,’ said Nazir Ahmed, with a laugh; ‘but this is quite a prosaic affair. Jehangir loves the beautiful wife of Ali Kuli Beg, and since the proud Persian refuses to listen to His Majesty, I have been directed to do what is necessary and remove him from the path. I can do nothing without your help, and I promise you plenty of gold from my master.’

‘That is a brave game, indeed,’ ejaculated a stout dark man, ‘and so I say—forward. Ali Kuli Beg is a gallant soldier; we are bound to have some excitement.’

‘Forward,’ exclaimed every one.

‘My brave friends,’ said Nazir Ahmed, ‘we

must take all the necessary precautions and pre-arrange matters in such a way as to be able to enter his room unawares, take him by surprise, and have him absolutely at our mercy, so that we may be able to dictate terms as becomes the emissaries of His Majesty.'

'Leave that to me,' said a slim, short man. 'I will be ready to receive you at any moment you desire, with open doors and open arms.'

'You are a fine man,' said Nazir Ahmed. 'We will reach the place, a little after midnight; the night is just suited for the purpose. I like dark nights, when the twinkling stars seem to say that they see but will not speak. Are you all agreed?'

'Agreed,' said all in one voice.

'Now let us disperse,' said Nazir Ahmed. 'Some of us must of course keep a close watch on the house, and we will all meet at the chowk about midnight. Now salaams, till we meet again,' and bowing, Nazir Ahmed departed.

They all met at the appointed time at the trysting-place, creeping like shadows out of darkness, and held a hasty council. The men appointed to watch the house reported everything favourable, and they dispersed to carry out their purpose, passing singly unobserved through the streets, and meeting again in a gloomy corner near the house of Ali Kuli Beg. Stopping for a moment there, Nazir Ahmed gave a peculiar whistle which was repeated from within.

‘ All is well, my brave friends,’ he whispered.

Slowly they glided out from their dark corner, and reaching the garden wall which surrounded the house of the Persian nobleman they found the small door open and noiselessly entered, taking a gravel path which went round the garden. Their first care was to fasten from outside the doors of the house and also those of the servants’ quarters. This done, leaving half a dozen men to guard the gate, they proceeded to the apartments of Ali Kuli Beg who slept in his upper room with all the doors and windows open. Boldly entering, they surrounded his couch with drawn swords, and at a sign from Nazir Ahmed, four of them silently lifted up the bed of Mihar-ul-Nissa and carried it into another room, and then resumed their places round his bed.

Nazir Ahmed, who was no coward, now placed the point of his dagger on the chest of the sleeping nobleman.

‘ Who are you ? ’ demanded Ali Kuli Beg, half asleep. ‘ What have you come here for ? ’

‘ We are men like you,’ replied Nazir Ahmed in a feigned voice, ‘ and have come on a very particular and important business.’

‘ Business,’ muttered Ali Kuli Beg, turning on his side, still under the influence of opium and very sleepy.

‘ Awake,’ said Nazir Ahmed, pricking with the point of his dagger a little harder, ‘ unless you

divorce your wife and pay me ten thousand mohurs, I will send you to an everlasting sleep.'

'Who dare dictate terms to me?' exclaimed Ali Kuli Beg, awakening like a sleeping lion, and snatching the dagger from the hand of Nazir Ahmed, he flung it to the other corner of the room.

'Fool,' said Nazir Ahmed, 'listen to reason. Death hovers at your pillow and is ready to receive you with open arms. Your life is entirely in our hands. Divorce your wife and point out to us your golden coffers, otherwise your life is forfeit.'

'Who dare whisper these words in my ears?' burst out Ali Kuli Beg, as with a sudden spring he jumped out of the bed, and took his stand many yards away from his assailants.

'Attack him,' cried Nazir Ahmed, as with drawn sword he rushed at Ali Kuli Beg, and forty swords flashed around the fearless Persian, who, with wonderful dexterity, foiled their aim by jumping over the bedstead, seizing his own sword, and before they could form again he rushed on them like a wild bull and wounded two of the foremost. The ruffians then attacked him in a body, but he was a match for an army, and like a Bengal tiger turned on the hunters with such fierceness that they could not withstand him, and several were killed or wounded, but he also was wounded in many places, so that when Nazir Ahmed and his friends rallied they began to gain upon him, when the door

suddenly opened, and a body of Ali Kuli Beg's servants rushed to his assistance.

Nazir Ahmed and his followers fled from the room, and were soon in the street, where they locked the garden gate behind them and dispersed. Ali Kuli Beg and his servants followed, but finding the gate locked he ordered it to be broken and the robbers pursued while he retired to look for Mihar-ul-Nissa, whose disappearance from his room was causing him great anxiety.

'Allah be praised,' said Mihar-ul-Nissa, as she saw him return. 'The great God in His mercy has saved you for me. But, dear husband, Agra is no place for us now, the clash of arms in your room woke me and I roused and freed the servants, their doors being locked from outside.'

'Dearest,' said Ali Kuli Beg, who was overjoyed to see her there, 'you have saved my life. They were gaining on me, but these fellows will never trouble us again: they have left a good number behind and many more have felt the sharpness of my sword.'

'You are so careless, my brave husband,' said Mihar-ul-Nissa. 'These were no ordinary robbers, they were all masked and were no doubt sent by some powerful enemy.'

'Life of my life, do not be uneasy about me,' said Ali Kuli Beg. 'I am not afraid of enemies who tremble to meet me in the light of day. Come, let us sleep in the bosom of love and leave the future in the hands of God.'

Thus saying he led her to another room, where his warm love soon chased away the shadow of trouble from her mind.

Jehangir having failed to sleep or occupy his mind by the usual state business, as a last resource had sent for singers, and after two years' abstinence had taken again a cup of his favourite wine, breathing her name over it in remembrance of his love. It was past midnight, but he still sat on his throne waiting for Nazir Ahmed and trying to soothe the embers of his rekindled passion. A party of dancing-girls of rare beauty and accomplishment were in attendance, dancing and singing like gay butterflies in spring time. Their pretty feet trod softly over the velvet carpet in artistic poses, now they stopped in the dance and opened their arms full of hope and yearning as if to receive the beloved, then, as if disappointed, with folded arms, drooping heads, and plaintive voices they set out again to win their love. Every gesture, every movement, every word touched a chord in Jehangir's heart, and ever and anon he looked for his love. At last, almost tired, he rose, and amid blessings and salutations of the courtiers and dancers retired to his private apartment.

'Nazir Ahmed,' exclaimed Jehangir, as he saw him crouching at the entrance of his room, 'what has happened? I am afraid you have been unsuccessful again. Fate is against me.'

Nazir Ahmed fixed a wavering gaze on the

Emperor but was unable to reply. Seeing a golden cup filled with wine in the hand of a page in attendance, he snatched it from his hand and drank it off, and then followed the King to his room.

‘Forgive me, sire,’ said Nazir Ahmed, ‘but I was not myself. I have just escaped with my life from the lion’s den. Some of my friends have served Your Majesty with their lives.’

‘Calm yourself,’ said Jehangir, ‘and tell me all the details of your sad adventure.’

‘Ali Kuli Beg is not a man,’ said Nazir Ahmed ; ‘he has the courage and strength of a Rustam. He sprang upon us like a tiger, and, by the time we were able to form for a united attack, his servants came, and we had to run for our lives. Some of my friends lie in his house ; they were brave men and ever ready to unsheath their swords, in the service of Your Majesty, at my slightest bidding.’

‘This must be avenged,’ said Jehangir stamping his foot on the ground ; ‘the families of your friends will be amply provided for.’

‘Thanks, thanks,’ said Nazir Ahmed. ‘May the glory of your reign spread over the whole universe. I will give Ali Kuli Beg no rest till I have avenged my friends.’

‘Have you hit upon a new scheme?’ asked Jehangir. ‘I trust it is not foredoomed to failure like the first two.’

‘An idea has just flashed through my mind,’

said Nazir Ahmed, 'which may kill the serpent and yet leave the cub untouched.'

'What is that?' asked Jehangir. 'I want the deed to be quietly carried through, otherwise I could have it done this moment.'

'I have an idea, Your Majesty,' said Nazir Ahmed, with an air of importance. 'To-morrow when he comes to the Durbar, he will naturally relate his adventure; kindly admire his courage and swordsmanship and stifle him with praise. He will be ready to do anything to prove his courage. I will have a famished tiger ready, and will pit him against the fierce animal.'

'How will you do it?' asked Jehangir, 'it is not quite clear to me yet.'

'I will scoff at his gallantry,' said Nazir Ahmed: 'I will call his adventure a nightmare, ask him to prove his courage in open court, and urge him to fight a tiger with a sword, and express my willingness to do it.'

'The plan seems to be a good one,' said Jehangir; 'even if it fails it will provide some amusement; you can go now and prepare for your work in the morning.'

Next morning at the usual hour Jehangir held his Durbar in the inner court of the lofty pavilion facing the Jumna and the open maidán, where his father used to sit to see the elephants fight. Ali Kuli Beg was a little later than usual, but it was not suspicion or fear which had kept him back.

He had risen late and was not able to be in attendance before the arrival of Jehangir.

‘You sleep late,’ said Jehangir, in a bantering tone when he knelt to salute him, ‘and there is a good reason; for night and sleep are yours when her hair lies dishevelled on your arms.’

‘Sire,’ said Ali Kuli Beg, ‘I had such an adventure yesterday: first a mad elephant attacked me and would have trampled me to death, but, Allah be praised, He helped me to defeat the wild brute: then a gang of dacoits broke into my house and took me unawares sleeping in my room, they, too, had to kiss the dust of their own heels in flight. It was very late when I went to bed, and slept on long after sunrise.’

‘Your feats of swordsmanship are simply wonderful,’ observed Jehangir; ‘we have not your equal in valour in the whole Empire. It is no easy matter to fight single-handed with a gang of armed dacoits and put a mad elephant to flight.’

‘Pardon me, sire,’ said Nazir Ahmed, who was in attendance, ‘there is nothing to boast of in what Ali Kuli Beg has done; there is nothing wonderful in his wounding an elephant and putting a gang of thieves to flight. My father subdued wild tigers unarmed, and used to stop a running elephant by holding it back by its tail.’

‘Still,’ said Jehangir, ‘the gallantry of Ali Kuli Beg deserves all praise, and I am sure he, too, could fight a tiger unarmed.’

‘Sire,’ said Nazir Ahmed, ‘pardon my saying so, but the Persian nobleman has not performed such a singular feat of arms or gallantry as to merit such praise from the lips of Your Majesty.’

‘Nazir Ahmed,’ said Ali Kuli Beg, fiercely, no longer able to restrain his anger, ‘I shall be obliged if you will meet me outside the court and allow me to teach you a lesson in good manners.’

‘My lord,’ replied Nazir Ahmed, ‘it will not add to your glory if you kill me, but we can both try our courage and strength with a tiger. I have a tiger in yonder courtyard, go and fight it, or acknowledge defeat and pass under my leg and I will walk in at this very moment and kill the tiger before His Majesty.’

‘By Allah,’ said Ali Kuli Beg, ‘it is not for a man like you to fight a tiger. But where is your tiger, that I may show His Majesty that I care no more for it than for a jackal.’

‘There is a tiger in the room opening into the arena,’ said Nazir Ahmed. ‘It ill becomes you to claim to be a tiger-killer when you have only driven back a few thieves.’

‘I am no braggart,’ said Ali Kuli Beg, angrily; ‘come with your tiger and see what I can do with it.’

‘I will put your bravery to trial,’ said Nazir Ahmed; ‘are you really in earnest?’

‘Certainly,’ said Ali Kuli Beg, vehemently, ‘if

you do not produce your tiger you yourself shall have to fight with me.'

'We shall see,' said Nazir Ahmed, as he whispered something in the ear of an attendant who was near him. The man disappeared, and a little later a famished tiger jumped out from a room into the enclosed arena some twenty feet below the imperial pavilion. It had been kept without food and now moved about restlessly and looked dreadfully fierce, but Ali Kuli Beg was not frightened: he made a salute to the Emperor, took his sword, and walking down the steps he opened the gate of the enclosure and appeared in the arena, crimson with anger. The tiger rushed at him with a bound, but with unrivalled coolness Ali Kuli Beg sprang aside, and before the tiger could turn back, his sword fell on its neck and inflicted a deep wound. The animal fell to the ground and roared in deep rage, but before it could rise Ali Kuli Beg struck him again, and his sword, passing through its neck, kissed the ground. He took up its fierce head and tossed it up before the pavilion.

A hurrah of applause greeted this wonderful feat of swordsmanship and physical strength. A moment after he walked up and presented the head of the tiger to the King. Jehangir, though greatly disappointed, showered gold coins over the head of the victorious nobleman and bestowed on him a valuable robe of honour, and conferred the title of tiger-killer (Sher Afgan) on him.

CHAPTER XVIII

JEHANGIR was sitting in his lofty apartments, under a gilded ceiling, on piles of velvet cushions with his head on his elbow, absorbed in his own thoughts in a state of complete abstraction, when the door opened and a corpulent man entered the apartments and stood beside him. The Emperor looked up, but his mind was far, far away, and he took no notice of the visitor.

‘My brother, my sovereign,’ said the corpulent man with great concern, ‘what ails you? What has happened to cloud your sunny spirits? You are now the Shah-in-Shah of Hindustan, and there is nothing in the world which you cannot command.’

‘Is it you Kutub-ud-din?’ said Jehangir, awakening from his reverie. ‘When did you return from Bengal? I have been expecting you for some time and I cannot tell you how welcome you are. I am in need of a friend, a bosom friend, who can share my misery and help me in my troubles.’

‘I returned only this moment,’ replied Kutub-ud-din, embracing the Emperor who had risen to

greet him ; ‘ but how you have changed ! instead of being jolly Prince Salim, you are now really the careworn Emperor Jehangir. Happiness and power do not go hand in hand. The weight of an empire seems to leave no room for pleasure. What troubles can you have which cannot be overcome ? ’

‘ The crown carries more troubles and cares with it than the perpetual sparkle of its stone jewels,’ said Jehangir heaving a deep sigh. ‘ For two years I have endeavoured to dispense justice to my people, the number of complainants is growing and they leave me no time. I am tired of it and cannot keep it up for long. My heart again desires to have some beloved object to surrender all its wealth of life and love. I cannot have my heart’s desire because I am a king and dare not do an open act of injustice. Happy are the poor for they have no cares and enjoy complete freedom of action. I often envy a poor peasant lustily singing away, when I, his King, am overburdened with cares.’

‘ I thought you had lost some great province,’ said Kutub-ud-din, with a laugh, ‘ and were surrounded by deep plots, but I see that your wound requires the healing nectar of some sweet lips to cure it. I am glad Your Majesty still finds time to visit the market of love ; even sages forget their wisdom and saints their asceticism when a glance enters the citadel of the heart and demands complete surrender.’

‘You are in high spirits,’ said Jehangir; ‘while I am dying and yearn for love to take possession of my soul and make it her own abode.’

‘The covetous eye of desire is never satisfied, as the oyster does not conceive the pearl till it closes its lips,’ said Kutub-ud-din. ‘I see no cause for despair. The King of Kings of Hindustan can have the whole world at his feet, and command fairies from paradise to do his bidding.’

‘Pray don’t tease me by light-hearted flatteries,’ said Jehangir. ‘My own servants refuse to obey me, and you will place angels and fairies at my command. You are indeed very kind, but you can keep this heavenly empire to yourself; may it be a source of blessings to you.’

‘From these fair ones of this earth we will take our revenge in paradise, if by the grace of God, they become the heavenly houris,’ said Kutub-ud-din, lightly; ‘but if Your Majesty will tell me now who has bewitched and captivated your heart, I will begin my magic and confine her spirit in a glass jar and present it to Your Majesty?’

‘My dear foster-brother,’ said Jehangir, ‘cannot you be serious for a moment? I will tell you all, but pray do not begin to preach to me on the injustice and the wrongness of it. I tell you it is all useless. My heart refuses to obey all reason, refuses to listen to all counsel; you must promise to help me whether it is moral or immoral, just or unjust. All I can say is that I am helpless and cannot stifle

the yearnings of my heart and live without her. I don't want a spirit in a glass jar, but her as she is.'

'I am yours to obey what you command me,' said Kutub-ud-din, 'you are my lawgiver, and there can be no better judge of morality or immorality than a ruling sovereign. I only wait for a word from you, then I will set to work without asking a single question.'

'That is like my own dear brother,' said Jehangir, joyfully. 'Now listen. It is an old story. You know how I loved Mihar-ul-Nissa and how she loved me. She was married in my absence against her wish, as I have now come to know. For months she would have nothing to do with her husband. I thought her faithless, while it is I who am to blame for neglecting her so long. Now that I know all, I want to make her my queen. I asked Ali Kuli Beg to divorce her, but he does not seem to understand me, and refuses to do anything. I am suffering torments of hell.'

'It is a sad business,' said Kutub-ud-din, with a sigh. 'Ali Kuli Beg is a nobleman and my friend. It is a painful duty which I have to perform, but the claims of foster-brotherhood are stronger than friendship, and it shall not be said that Kutub-ud-din refused to do his King's bidding.'

'It is just like you,' said Jehangir, joyfully. 'If a foster-brother cannot share the sorrows of a brother, who can?'

'I am very sorry indeed,' said Kutub-ud-din,

'that Ali Kuli Beg is concerned in it—not that I am afraid of him. I shall be fortunate indeed if my life is sacrificed at the altar of service of Your Majesty, but it is painful to fight a friend.'

'I hope you will be able to persuade him,' said Jehangir.

'I have no such hope,' said Kutub-ud-din. 'Ali Kuli Beg is an honourable man and a blunt soldier.'

'Now don't worry,' said Jehangir. 'Let us eat and drink and leave fate to decide the future.'

'How glad I am to see you in the old mood again,' said Kutub-ud-din. 'Let us eat and drink together and have old times back again.'

Jehangir gave the order and a banquet was prepared in the old, old way : wine and music and pretty dancing girls graced the feast and waved the world and its clouds of care aside from the mirror of the soul. Their melodies touched and set the soul vibrating, reminding it of its own everlasting youth, freshness, and glory. The evening was full of joy for Jehangir and his friend, and it was in the small hours of the morning that they parted and returned to their respective apartments.

Kutub-ud-din was foster-brother of Jehangir. His mother had been Jehangir's nurse and they had played together from their childhood, and she had taught Kutub-ud-din, when he was a mere child, to regard the service of his Prince as his only religion, so that he was prepared to shed blood

where even a drop of perspiration fell from his beloved Prince. Next morning when he got up, and as soon as his toilet was over, he proceeded to the house of Ali Kuli Beg, and alighting from his chariot entered the room.

‘What an agreeable surprise!’ said Ali Kuli Beg, as he rose with great affection to receive him and extended his arms to embrace him. ‘I thought you were still in Bengal.’ But as Kutub-ud-din held back, Ali Kuli Beg dropped his arms and said, ‘I hope time has not changed the sentiments of friendship which united our hearts.’

‘My friend,’ replied Kutub-ud-din, with composed dignity and true feeling, ‘my heart yearns to cling to you as a friend, but circumstances beyond my control stand in the path of our friendship.’

‘You are enigmatical,’ retorted Ali Kuli Beg, playing with his sword. ‘I am no philosopher: not to be a friend is to be an enemy.’

‘My friend,’ said Kutub-ud-din, ‘for I regard you still as such, listen to me. You are in a great danger, and unless you can conquer your pride and your vanity, you have not many days on this earth.’

‘It ill becomes you to threaten me in my own house,’ said Ali Kuli Beg. ‘What is the danger you speak of?’

‘The Emperor’s anger and my sword,’ said Kutub-ud-din, with dignity.

‘Ha, ha,’ burst out Ali Kuli Beg, scornfully, ‘you have been sent by His Majesty, and I suppose you will promise to spare my life if I resign my wife to His Majesty. Pray keep your lips sealed if this is the object of your visit.’

‘Listen to me,’ said Kutub-ud-din. ‘I sympathise with your feelings and know how hard it is for you, but the case is peculiar, and you will do better to listen to reason. Jehangir is infatuated, and unless you yield to his wishes there is no help for you.’

‘I never expected to hear this from you,’ interrupted Ali Kuli Beg. ‘I place no value on an ignominious life, and I am deaf to all that you may say.’

‘I admire your sense of honour,’ admitted Kutub-ud-din; ‘but my orders are final, and I must warn you against the folly of opposing the Emperor of Hindustan. Draw back from the precipice while there is yet time.’

‘One has to die sometime,’ said Ali Kuli Beg; ‘and why not now with honour, than a little later with ignominy?’ Pray tell His Majesty that I can no longer serve him, and I beg to resign his commission. I will go to my little estate and pass my days in complete freedom.’

‘It is all useless,’ said Kutub-ud-din. ‘You cannot leave Hindustan. I give you three days to think and come to a decision, on the fourth day I will come again for an answer.’

‘ You will find me ready to receive you in my country house a few miles from here,’ said Ali Kuli Beg, ‘ my reply will be the same as to-day.’

‘ I will be with you at this time on the fourth day,’ said Kutub-ud-din. ‘ May Allah give you wisdom, may the Prophet help me to keep my vision clear.’

‘ I shall be always happy to meet you whenever you come,’ replied Ali Kuli Beg.

Three days passed and Kutub-ud-din received no reply from the Persian nobleman. He disliked the idea of fighting his own friend, but he had given his promise and so he resolved to do his duty, and marched up to the country house of Ali Kuli Beg with an escort of armed soldiers. Ali Kuli Beg courteously received him at his own gate, but he was fully armed and ready for a fight.

‘ What is your reply ? ’ asked Kutub-ud-din, abruptly. ‘ If you still persist, I am here to do what is necessary and take your wife away without your consent.’

‘ Do not let your tongue wag so loosely,’ cried Ali Kuli Beg, ‘ otherwise I will wrench it out of your foul mouth and make a present of it to the crows and kites.’

‘ Don’t abuse like a woman,’ said Kutub-ud-din, ‘ but prepare yourself for fight. It is useless wasting words: take this,’ and Kutub-ud-din brought his sword down upon him. Ali Kuli Beg parried the blow with his sword, and then his own

entered to the hilt in the bulky body of faithful Kutub-ud-din.

‘Fire!’ cried Kutub-ud-din, as he fell on the ground.

His escort raised their guns and fired, but, quick as the eye can wink, Ali Kuli Beg’s sword flashed again like a lambent flame and killed the soldier who was near him; the suddenness of the attack confused the soldiers, who fell back a little and fired a volley on the brave Ali Kuli Beg, and wounded him in many places.

‘Come forward one by one,’ said the brave Persian, as he brandished his sword, and turning towards Kaba threw some dust over his head by way of ablution and faced his antagonists, but his challenge was not accepted. A shower of arrows came in reply, and a poisoned arrow entering near his heart, he fell beside his dying friend.

‘Friend,’ murmured Kutub-ud-din, with some effort, ‘I only tried to do my duty. Forgive me.’

‘Never mind,’ said Ali Kuli Beg, ‘we die as friends.’

‘God bless you,’ gasped Kutub-ud-din, as he tried to grasp the hand of his friend, and in a moment their souls flew together to heaven.

A man rode at once to report the matter to the King of Kings. Nazir Ahmed met him at the gate, received the news with great delight, and ran to report it to Jehangir.

‘Ali Kuli Beg is no more,’ said he, approaching

the king, 'Mirza Kutub-ud-din sacrificed his life to serve Your Majesty.'

'May God have mercy on his soul,' said Jehangir. 'Has my foster-brother deserted me? Are you sure of the news?'

'A man of his escort has come to report,' said Nazir Ahmed. 'He quarrelled with Ali Kuli Beg and died fighting; the brave Ali Kuli Beg is also dead. I am told,' he added in an under tone, 'that Khatun Mihar-ul-Nissa is exceedingly grieved and laments the loss of her husband.'

'My foster-brother dead! Mihar-ul-Nissa free!' murmured Jehangir, as he got up and began to walk, his mind tossed by conflicting emotions.

'My foster-brother and Ali Kuli Beg are both dead, this is the report you have received?' he asked, stopping and turning to Nazir Ahmed.

'Yes, Sire,' replied Nazir Ahmed, 'a soldier of his own escort has brought me the news.'

'Let it be proclaimed that I am exceedingly sorry at the loss of two faithful servants,' said Jehangir, after a little pause, 'and order a court mourning for them. Their bodies, of course, should be brought here and buried with all the necessary ceremonial befitting their ranks. The family of Kutub-ud-din is already in the palace. Let an order be issued that Khatun Ali Kuli Beg be brought to the palace as well and everything done to alleviate her grief. She must be treated with the greatest possible consideration.'

Nazir Ahmed bowed and withdrew. The necessary orders were at once issued, and a suitable retinue sent to bring Mihar-ul-Nissa to the palace to receive such consolation as the imperial harem could offer.

A little before sunset the bodies of the two noblemen were brought wrapped in brocades and costly shawls, followed by relations, friends, and hired mourners who were loud in their lamentations for their evening meal. With due ceremony the bodies were laid in their respective tombs with sufficient room for the bodies to sit up to give the account of their lives to the death-angel who would shortly visit them. The sun shone at its fairest, full of life and joy, bearing witness to the eternal life of the soul. Friends and relations returned to their homes, hardly realising their loss, as something within seemed to regard the parting as temporary, and to promise a meeting hereafter, just as the setting sun rises again from darkness fathomless as death.

The eventful day passed into the lap of night, and over its grave spread the peaceful light of the moon with its wondrous calm and sweetness speaking of souls' repose on the other side of the valley of death.

Jehangir was still promenading the lofty balcony of his palace when he saw a palanquin enter, escorted by a company of the imperial guard. His heart gave a throb, and on the impulse of the

moment he sent a message through a page, and a little later the palanquin was brought to his room, and the bearers departed leaving it there. The beating of his heart almost choked him as he approached the palanquin and lifted the curtain.

The lady in the palanquin, clad from head to foot in black and closely veiled, promptly stepped out. Then throwing aside her veil, she stood facing Jehangir with contempt and scorn in her eyes.

Jehangir quailed beneath her withering glances and clung to a pillar for support. There stood Mihar-ul-Nissa before him, flushed with anger and yet how beautiful. She had no doubt changed. The innocent light of budding womanhood, which two years before hung like a glory round her beautiful face, was now no more ; it had been replaced by a dignity of expression and stateliness of form which no words can describe. Jehangir stood spell-bound, his eyes riveted on her beautiful face.

Mihar-ul-Nissa was the first to speak. 'Sire,' she said in a calm and dignified tone, 'will Your Majesty express to me your pleasure?'

'My pleasure!' repeated Jehangir vaguely, approaching her with slow and faltering steps. 'I see you at last after long ages of waiting.'

'Your Majesty perhaps is aware that I have just lost my husband,' said Mihar-ul-Nissa, in a firm voice, 'and with Your Majesty's permission I

should like to retire and return to my home, the house of my husband.'

'Husband!' murmured Jehangir dreamily; 'do not talk to me of him. It is cruel of you to remind me of it at this moment.'

'Why should I not speak of my husband?' asked Mihar-ul-Nissa angrily. 'He, who was my very own, the memory of him is dear to me. I shall cherish it all my life. We women are not fickle and faithless like men.'

'Listen to me,' said Jehangir in a supplicating voice. 'I have loved you always and shall love you for ever and ever. I cannot tell you how I have pined for you and suffered. You promised to love me, but you became another's, yet your image has never been absent from my heart even for a moment, your name is always on my lips. When they told me that you married him of your own free will I sought to dismiss your image from my mind, and I tried to forget you. It was only a few days ago that I learned the truth, and now that you are free . . .'

'Free,' interrupted Mihar-ul-Nissa, 'never. I am not faithless like you to forget my husband and his love. There was a time when I waited for you, counting every moment and expecting you, but you forgot my very existence, and the nobleman who became my husband tolerated my love for you and forgave me all. He won my heart by his pure, selfless love, and I became his and shall

always remain his. Why are you giving me unnecessary pain ? ’

‘ Pain ! ’ cried Jehangir.

‘ Is it thus that you sympathise with my afflictions ? ’ retorted Mihar-ul-Nissa. ‘ If you love me as you say, how can you find happiness in my sufferings ? ’

‘ How can I grieve,’ said Jehangir, ‘ when after long and weary waiting I see you near me, and love leaps through every pulse of my body ? ’

‘ I am not here of my own free will,’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa, turning aside, ‘ I came because I was offered no choice, but I must tell Your Majesty that I cannot be anything to you. If you have any true and noble feeling, pray let me go back to my home.’

‘ For God’s sake don’t torment me,’ said Jehangir in agonised tones. ‘ Let us forget the past and bury it with its freight of sadness and woe, let it disappear like a cloud before the coming sunshine. You loved me once, is that love dead ? Beloved, don’t struggle with your own heart, let us make up for the time that is gone.’

‘ No,’ murmured Mihar-ul-Nissa, though her heart came to her lips and would have replied otherwise ; ‘ no,’ she repeated with some effort. ‘ You are mistaken if you think that anything can now move me. There are thousands fairer than myself who will be happy to have a smile from you, but as for me I am dead.’

‘Mihar-ul-Nissa,’ implored Jehangir again, ‘I, who rule an empire, stand before you a suppliant. Give me the alms of love, send not the beggar empty from your door.’

‘My king,’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa coldly though softly, ‘it is useless ; my heart is dead within me. Leave me alone.’

‘Cruel Mihar-ul-Nissa,’ said Jehangir. ‘Cannot you think of the old, old days ? Have you no mercy, no word of hope for me ?’

‘My heart is dead and buried with my husband,’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa. ‘This interview is extremely painful, and the sooner it ends the better.’

‘Is it really painful ?’ said Jehangir angrily. ‘I am very sorry to have detained you so long. I will never trouble you again,’ so saying he walked out of the apartment.

‘Nazir Ahmed,’ he said to his attendant, ‘conduct the widow of Ali Kuli Beg to the Queen-mother’s apartments and enrol her as her Majesty’s attendant with Rs. 60 a month as her maintenance allowance.’

‘My orders are irrevocable,’ he added, as he saw Nazir Ahmed hesitate.

CHAPTER XIX

MIHAR-UL-NISSA without a murmur installed herself in the rooms assigned to her by the Queen-mother, welcoming their gloom, and for about a month would see no one, and seemed to find satisfaction in her own dark and cheerless abode. Slowly as hues of life shifted and changed around her, and a new spring burst through newly budding trees and appeared with its crown of flowers all radiant, glorious, and triumphant, Mihar-ul-Nissa found the veil of sadness melting away as if it had no reality, much though she wished to keep it as a part of her life. Her thoughts became active, her soul seemed rising and longing for life and its sweet, pathetic poetry.

She began by joining the ladies of the harem in their gaieties. She found her allowance hardly enough to pay her servants. She was too proud to seek any outside help, and strove to supplement it by the work of her own skilful fingers. She found pleasure and amusement in painting delicate silks and working beautiful embroideries, which were eagerly bought by the ladies of the harem and enabled her to live in ease and comfort.

After a little time she furnished her own room,

according to her own taste. Over the bare white walls she painted shrubs of roses crowned by flowers glowing with living colours and with nightingales perched on their branches, and over her small doors she hung curtains of a misty greenness, worked beautiful cushions, and transformed the bare room into a bower fit to be the habitation of a fairy. It was soon a favourite resort of the ladies of the harem, who took great delight in her lively conversation. The change in her surroundings was but a dim shadow of the transformation in her soul. Her heart was full of deep, sharp longings for companionship; the idea often swept over her so strongly as almost to carry away her self-control, and then she would reproach herself for her faithlessness to her late husband, and in deep remorse shed torrents of tears. Then unbidden would rise the image of Jehangir and his love, and her whole being would throb at the idea. The passage of time only seemed to increase her desire for life, and to throw into the background her married life as if it was a phase of existence on which rested sunlight and clouds, but of no great consequence.

The fasting month of Ramzan had come and lingered wearily till the new crescent of the moon appeared in the sky and brought a new joy to the hearts of the faithful. A roar of cannon had announced the happy news, and there were great and general rejoicings.

The sun had just risen from its bed in the eastern sky and flung its rose-hued garments across the golden clouds. The Muezzin called the faithful to morning prayers; his sonorous voice, echoing and reverberating through the city walls, was borne on the cool, fresh breeze and awoke the 'faithful' on the Id morning. The great orchestra of nature was playing the marvellous harmonies of awakening day, thousands of birds were singing their morning hymns in welcome of a new day and rejoicing as floods of rosy light flashed through the sky, touching everything into light and life.

In the Mahomedan world the morning of Id was bright with gaieties. Thousands of persons dressed in their holiday garments were promenading the streets and embracing each other as if they had met after a long separation. The chilling silence of solemn asceticism had vanished with the rise of the new moon and was succeeded by pleasure and merriment. Even the poor people were in high spirits and enjoyed the cool sherbets and delicious sweets which the rich Mahomedans freely distributed, and were trying hard to make up for the long and scrupulously observed abstinence of a whole month.

The imperial seraglio was full of excitement and bustle, the courtyard being sprinkled with perfumed waters and the rooms refurnished. The ladies of the harem, vying with each other in the choice of their ornaments and dress, appeared in

exquisite toilets to celebrate the Id with the Queen-mother. Mihar-ul-Nissa was also present, wearing a white muslin robe of stainless purity unadorned by a single jewel or ornament, accompanied by servant-maids dressed in richest brocades. Yet as she walked about greeting her friends, she was the centre of all admiration, the cynosure of all eyes, and shone like a sun amid a galaxy of stars, when Jehangir, whom she had not seen for ten months, entered the harem to offer his Id greetings to the Queen-mother.

He too was dressed in pure white which gracefully fitted his tall, slight figure, elegant in all its outlines, perfect in carriage and bearing. He wore only a necklace of pearls, and had ruby buttons in his silk robes.

Mihar-ul-Nissa saw him enter and all her pulses bounded with joy as she wished he would look at her, and was conscious of a strange desire to take his love as a gift from life, fighting furiously against her faith to her late husband. Feeling too excited to meet Jehangir face to face she quietly slid away from the Queen's room to her own, and softly closed the door behind her. Jehangir had seen her as he entered and caught a glimpse of her face as she passed through the sunlit verandah, under a shaft of the sun's rays which lighted up her face for a moment with an ethereal loveliness. He forgot all his anger against her and would have given a kingdom to win her smile.

He stopped for a while with his mother and at last resolved to try his fate once again. He walked up to the room of Mihar-ul-Nissa in mad expectancy. With trembling hand he opened the door. There on an ottoman, covered with blue silks and white stars, she lay like a full moon in the lap of a rainless blue sky. Hastily rising from her couch and gracefully bowing to him she almost touched the ground according to the usual custom. Jehangir bent over her, put his arm round her waist, and drew her close to his breast, kissing her again and again with all the passion of his soul.

‘Am I dreaming?’ he murmured to himself, looking at Mihar-ul-Nissa, who lay passive in his arms. ‘Will you be mine now and for ever?’

‘My Prince, my Emperor,’ said Mihar-ul-Nissa in a soft and musical voice, her heart beating against his, full of undefined happiness. ‘Why do you ask me? I gave my answer to you long, long ago.’

‘Dearer than life,’ said Jehangir, full of inexpressible joy, ‘you have given me new hope, and now what glorious happiness shall be ours. God knows, I have waited, suffered, and longed for this moment all my life.’

‘It is not a ruby which sparkles in thy white silk robes but a crimson drop of my heart’s blood, which has taken hold of thy garments for its murder,’ said she.

‘Don’t blame me, my love,’ said Jehangir. ‘Who

can take the measure of my sufferings, the pain, the anguish of my despair when I learnt that you had given yourself to another.'

'Did they not tell you that I was put under opium and married, that even then I waited for you, and you never came? I counted every moment, but still you would not come.'

'Alas, they never told me this,' said Jehangir, 'otherwise, I would have come to you through steel walls. But now I know all; a private entry in my father's diary revealed to me the whole thing. Fate played us false.'

'Even so it was willed by Allah,' said Mihar-ul-Nissa. 'He played with us as we do with our toys, and who can tell what lies under the impenetrable veil of the future.'

'Love and happiness,' replied Jehangir, as he pressed her to his breast. 'How is it, my life, that your maids are so richly dressed, while you are only in a plain muslin robe?'

'Those born to servitude must dress,' said Mihar-ul-Nissa, with a fascinating smile, 'as it shall please those whom they serve. They are my servants, they dress according to my fancy. But I, the slave of another, and that the Emperor of Hindustan, must dress according to his pleasure, not my own.'

'The Emperor of the Hind,' said Jehangir, kissing her serene brow, 'is a slave of your slaves and longs to remain in the halo of your light. The evil

days, like the gloomy Ramzan, have passed away, and the moon of my desire has risen on this happy Id day.'

'Why do people grumble at Ramzan,' said Mihar-ul-Nissa, as a dainty dimple adorned her chin, 'when a few days fasting ensures them eternal paradise, overflowing with wine and houris?'

'God has sent my houri to me,' said Jehangir, looking at her with loving eyes. 'I would fast for a whole life-time to have your smile for a moment, but I cannot believe in the promises of the saint for to-morrow, when I can enjoy the honeyed nectar of the union to-day.'

'Star of my life,' said Mihar-ul-Nissa, 'your love has touched my heart, I feel all the richer for it. Though we were not destined to enjoy the first perfume of our love, yet its fragrance is filling my soul and promising a bountiful harvest of love's flowers.'

'You will be my bride before this evening ends,' said Jehangir, decisively, 'and then we shall part no more.'

'I am yours,' said Mihar-ul-Nissa, full of ecstatic joy. 'My happiness lies in what pleases you.'

He gathered her again in his arms and time seemed to lose all significance.

At last he rose to go, to announce his decision to the court, and to arrange for the marriage ceremonies.

CHAPTER XX

It was a lovely summer evening, a black rain cloud had ridden up on the wings of fragrant breezes and burst into a light shower, rendering the evening cool, tranquil, and delicious, as a sweet crescent of a tender moon appeared nestling in the lap of the blue sky, smiling through the misty darkness of the evening.

The slow, golden hours of the day passed away all too soon. Mihar-ul-Nissa was waiting for Jehangir, full of joy and expectant love ; blushes and smiles suffused her face as her thoughts flew from one pleasing point to another, happy as a nightingale flying from blossom to blossom in a lovely rose-garden filled with the subtle intoxication of life and love.

She was still seated lost in her own dreams when Jehangir appeared with a Kazi and two witnesses to perform the marriage ceremony according to the law of the prophet. It was extremely simple : the Kazi recited some verses from the Quran, asked them if they were willing to accept each other as husband and wife, and, having received their assent, he declared them to be married. He offered his

blessings for their happiness, receiving a necklace of pearls as a reward for his simple service, and retired immediately.

Jehangir rose and took her in his arms, kissing her eyes, lips, and cheeks, and then beginning all over again. They were lost in a dream of life, floating in a stream of love, and breathing love with every beat of their hearts.

‘The lovely moon has appeared in my sky,’ said Jehangir in raptures, ‘and my fasting is over.’

‘The silver key of the cellar which had been lost has been found,’ replied Mihar-ul-Nissa, ‘and now we shall drink and drink from the fountain of love and happiness.’

‘If sages but knew what bliss it is to lie enchained in the silken tresses of love,’ said Jehangir, ‘they would give up their vain quest for paradise and go mad for present bliss.’

‘My love,’ murmured Mihar-ul-Nissa, and looked at him with eyes full of deep longings and love, and then without a word she nestled closer like a pure white lily in his arms.

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The news of the marriage had spread, and when the first light of the following morning broke in rosy clouds the Imperial court prepared itself for the new festivities. The grand marble halls were newly arranged, their floors were washed with sweet scented waters, covered with rich carpets, and decorated with a wealth of jasmine and roses.

Congratulatory songs were composed and set to music by the court dancing girls, while the great dignitaries prepared themselves for a grand Durbar.

When Jehangir rose, a crowd of maids were already waiting at the door with their congratulations, whilst the nobles and dignitaries awaited him in the Durbar hall to offer their congratulations in person. Jehangir was in a state of ecstasy. All his Empire had never brought him the joy which was now his, and he could not think of separating even for a moment from his beloved, so he ordered a curtain to be hung up beside the throne and then appeared with Mihar-ul-Nissa at his side behind the curtain. He proclaimed her as his Empress and conferred on her the title of Nur Jahan (or the Light of the World), and in celebration of the event he opened his treasures, and the festivities that followed were such as even the Imperial city had rarely known before.

Jehangir, having found the priceless pearl of life, cared little for the Empire and its petty affairs, his whole world was enshrined in Nur Jahan. He lived, moved, and had his being in love, and was content to float on its sunlit stream. While Nur Jahan, one by one, took up the duties of State, and from her curtained window directed its affairs, Jehangir sat beside her happy that her image was reflected in his eyes. He told his ministers that for himself he required nothing but a cup of wine, a loaf of bread, and the sight of his beloved, who

had enough wit at the tip of her roseate fingers to rule all the kingdoms of the earth.

Jehangir was not far wrong in his estimate of the ability of his Empress. Nur Jahan infused a new spirit into the government of the country, re-established even-handed justice irrespective of caste and creed, which had begun to influence justice under Jehangir.

‘Hindus and Mahomedans both are worshippers of God,’ she said, ‘and subjects of the Emperor, who stands in the place of God to his people, and could, as Emperor, belong to no caste or creed.’ She animated the administration with the spirit of a mother. Thousands of new wells were sunk, inns were built for travellers, and peace and prosperity spread their wings over the land, drawn by the smiles of justice, and no longer frightened away by the spectre of injustice and misrule.

The few years following which were given to Jehangir and Nur Jahan were full of infinite sweetness; years, all golden, slipped silently by one after another as they lay in the cradle of love, rocked in its fragrant breeze. Once only they were separated for a while when Mohabat Khan rose in rebellion and took Jehangir prisoner. Nur Jahan attacked the rebel with her army, losing three of her elephant drivers in the fight, and yet never turning back till she had rescued her beloved Jehangir.

But the kaleidoscope of time moves on and on,

the hues of life shift and change, varying and transient as the colour of the sunset over the snowy Himalyas, now an opalescent with living colour, and in a moment passing away leaving the snowy ranges ashen gray.

At last the scene changes, Jehangir is no more. The curtain rises at his deathbed as he dies smiling in her arms, and in a moment she is Empress no longer. Shah Jehan ascends the throne and assigns her a set of apartments in the palace at Lahore so that she may remain near the mausoleum of Jehangir at Shahdra, which rises in due course over his grave.

Mihar-ul-Nissa lingers for a little while like a fading rose shedding its last perfume round the grave of her love, and then closes her eyes on this earth.

She, who would have built a mausoleum of silver in memory of her father, is buried a few hundred yards away from that of her husband. A dark, low, brick and mortar monument was all that was raised over her grave, which now lies in ruins, inhabited by a madman and his flock of goats.

She was almost prophetically inspired when she said :—

‘On my poor tomb there is neither a lamp nor a flower,
Neither a moth burns its wings,
Nor the Bul-Bul sings from her bower.’